Amrita Sher-Gil: Conversations in Modernism

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Amrita Sher-Gil: Conversations in Modernism

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Art and Art History from The College of William & Mary

by

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Three emails a day, midnight emails, as many as five meetings a week, meetings lasting as long as 2 ½ hours, no work, incomplete work, and isolated pages in separate documents—this was the baggage that I brought to my 18 month collaboration with my advisor, Charles Palermo. What did Charles bring to the table? Midnight responses, as many meetings as I wanted for as long as I wanted, his commentary on my terms, endless patience, advice, caring, information and support, tailored advising specific to my personal needs, understanding if I cancelled meetings or just wasn’t producing good pages that week, emotional and intellectual back-up, no pressure, and never asking for anything in return. He turned my weekly emotional wreckage into something constructive. I am not exaggerating when I say that this project would not have been completed without his support and guidance. There were so many times when I thought I just could not do it. Charles would get me reinvested in the project when I felt tired and angry and defeated. The delight our conversations about Sher-Gil would incite in me would get me through those long nights of writing. He believed in the project and he believed in me. He helped me realize an enormously important and deeply personal goal. I mean—how do you thank such a person? You can’t really. You’re forever indebted. I’m forever indebted. Thank you.

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(Re)Introducing Modernism

Thank you very much, my dear, for Gauguin's book 'Noa Noa'. I had been wanting to read it for a long time. Yes, I have a few small books on Gauguin, but if you would send me from time to time the beautiful colour reproductions displayed in the windows of that shop in rue de la Grand Chaumiere… I would be really grateful. I would love to have some of Modigliani and of Picasso too. If there are some with good colour reproductions of Braque's still lifes or other works, I would love to have those as well.

- Amrita Sher-Gil, Letter to Indira Sher-Gil, February 29, 1937

In April of 1937, Picture Play magazine published an article entitled “Art and Appreciation,” by artist Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941). At this point in her career, Sher-Gil’s persona was well known, and her art was recognized as a moderately important component of the Indian modernist art movement. In this article, Sher-Gil describes the artwork of her contemporaries with her famously frank and uncompromising voice. She claims that these artists were inadequate because their work was “diametrically opposed to the vital and significant stylization of form that characterizes sculpture and painting of Ellora, Ajanta, Egyptian, Chinese, Japanese, Early Christian, Impressionist, and Post-Impressionist Art.” Although at first blush Sher-Gil’s later artworks may seem to stylistically align with the work of artists like Sunayani Devi, who was praised for her “untainted” artistic hand, Sher-Gil’s perspective and process were much more complicated.¹ She traveled frequently in her early years, spent her childhood in Hungary, studied art briefly in Italy and underwent her formal artist’s training in Paris as a young adult. She was not sheltered—she spent a good portion of her life outside of India, only

¹ Ironically Devi also had a complicated perspective despite her classification as a “primitivist” artist. Although her reputation for “purity” made her work popular, she was a member of the Tagore family, an extremely affluent and prolific group in the literature and art worlds. Even if she did not receive direct education, she would have been exposed to the micro-milieu of her family. However, Sher-Gil consistently communicated her complicated relationship with art and culture in public, and never suggested that her work was “simple” in any way.
returning as an adult to provide a self-proclaimed fresh perspective of the newly stable national identity. Her relationship with cultural heritage was extremely complex. Her article displays her understanding of the history of art, and her right as an artist and a viewer to mix judgment criteria for multiple cultures and time periods. These beliefs assume that all art could be judged by a simple overarching and uncomplicated assessment of form based in the underlying “truth” of reality (an idea that was central to many modernists including Paul Gauguin). She references artworks from heritage sites in India to works from the Middle East, the Far East, and the West. This displays the effects of the continually expanding global community, but it also exhibits Sher-Gil’s abundant education in the history of art, and her desire for others to adopt her intercultural approach to understanding, appreciating, and creating art.

Identity and the concept of the individual had become tied to the idea of the Indian nation by Sher-Gil’s time. Because of Sher-Gil’s difficult heritage and motley upbringing, her relationship with cultural identity was complicated. Sher-Gil was a half Indian, half Hungarian modernist artist who worked during the period leading up to Indian independence. She experienced the effects of World War I, as well as the rise of the Hindu National Movement. Her family was affluent enough to educate her internationally because of her father’s stipend from the British government.² Her father’s staunch Indian nationalist beliefs and his monetary connection to the British Raj complicated Sher-Gil’s identity further; indeed Sunduram describes Sher-Gil’s father,

² On her Indian side, Sher-Gil came from a prominent clan in the Sikh aristocracy. Umrao’s father conquered a significant portion of land after embracing the Maharaja, and though it was confiscated, it was eventually given back after he sustained an injury in a battle. Umrao and his brother inherited the land after their father died. However, while Umrao was in Hungary during the early part of Amrita’s childhood he became a member of the revolutionary Ghadar Party. Umrao feared the British government might take away his land as a result, and after his involvement with nationalist groups was discovered his stipend was reduced and only allocated to him in an allowance by his loyalist brother (Vivan Sunduram, Amrita Sher-Gil: A Self-Portrait in Letters and Writings [New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2010], xxiii-xxxvi).
Umrao alternately as a “British dandy”\textsuperscript{3} and an “ascetic.”\textsuperscript{4} Education and affluence would have been problematized in the Indian nation as vestiges of the British yoke of oppression. Sher-Gil had both an insider’s and outsider’s perspective of this new India. Although she spent a lot of time in India and had an Indian father, her Indian experience fell outside the parameters of the nation at this time. However, Sher-Gil took advantage of this period of ideological homogenization in the creation of an Indian nation. When she returned to India as an adult, she emphasized her Indian roots, and suggested that her outsider’s perspective would be valuable for viewing India most objectively, claiming that she knew, “for certain that had we not come away to Europe I should perhaps never have realized that a fresco from Ajanta or a small piece of sculpture in the Musée Guimet is worth more than the whole Renaissance!”

In a fragmented letter to her close friend and art critic Karl Kandalavala in August of 1937, Sher-Gil exuberantly expresses her desire to “embrace you when you say things like Post-Impressionism having fundamental analogy with Ajanta. It is so true. They are of the same family…” Perhaps more explicitly than in her article in “Art and Appreciation,” Sher-Gil’s philosophy becomes clear in this letter. For Sher-Gil there would be something essential about the work of Post-Impressionists that “good” artists had been tapping into for centuries. This understanding of art history cross-culturally and cross-temporally begins to get at the heart of the kind of modernism that might prove useful when considering the argument of this thesis; but before we delve into a useful definition of modernism, it might be valuable to discuss why modernism needs redefining at all.

\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., xxvi.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., xxiii.
Partha Mitter published *The Triumph of Modernism: India’s artists and the avant-garde 1922-1947* in 2007. It remains the preeminent text on Indian modernism in the field today (as the majority of texts deal with Indian classical or traditional art, and a very few skip directly to contemporary art). Mitter begins his introduction, understandably, with the troubled past of modern Indian art history. He assesses the field as suffering from the ‘Picasso manqué syndrome,’ a term he coined to define the problem that any influence the West takes from the East is merely considered an affinity, whereas any influence the East takes from the West is considered derivative (an argument supported by many, including W. G. Archer in his famous 1959 text, *India and Modern Art*). Mitter criticizes this assertion based on the lack of equality in this exchange rather than on the idea of the exchange itself. But let us consider the way he forms his argument and its potential implications for our understanding of modernism.

Mitter rationalizes the Indian modern art movement in terms of European modernism with the idea of multiple modernities. He claims that, “what is most exhilarating about modernisms across the globe is their plurality, heterogeneity and difference.” The implications of this idea of multiple modernities are problematic indeed, for they maintain European modernism, untouched and untainted, at the center. Indeed, Mitter even uses the rhetoric of “center” and “peripheries,” once more reiterating the centrality of Europe to the traditional narrative of modernism, and keeping this narrative uncomplicated by merely adding addendum chapters. He criticizes the central pillar of European modernism in scholarship, citing specific instances in the narrative of the Italian Renaissance where artists that did not come from the main cities were ignored.

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or treated cursorily. It is ironic, then, that at the end of the prologue he notes that he will only be dealing with artists from Calcutta as representative of the entire subcontinent of India (a laughably larger and more diverse area than Italy). Regardless, for this discourse about modernism, “emanating from metropolitan centres such as Paris, other modernisms are dismissed as peripheral to its triumphal progress. Yet, the centre-periphery relationship is not one of geography but of power and authority…” Mitter has identified one of the issues of modernism here. However, the centre-periphery relationship itself is the problem, not, as he suggests the unequal flow of influence and information.

Mitter might be bound to disagree with this assessment because of his belief in the central importance of culture to artistic production. Interestingly, Mitter claims to not believe in culture as such when he suggests that, “the claimed purity of cultures is simply a nationalist myth fabricated in the nineteenth century.” However, even within the same breath, he makes the claim that, “the strongest cultures have often developed through constant cross-fertilizations and crossing of cultural frontiers,” viewing “[h]ybridity… [as an] empowering [agent for] the colonized…” These claims all suggest an understanding of any culture as something with an innate and quintessential difference (for hybridity to exist, there needs to have been pure entities to begin with), which would be contradictory to his initial claim that pure culture is a myth. Difference may indeed have been an agent of empowerment for the colonized; however it only reinforced the main assertion of the colonizers—that there was an inherent difference between the East and the West (terms

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 9.
8 Ibid., 9.
9 Ibid.
defined during this period), between the center and the periphery. This belief is iterated in
his claim that “the[ modernists’] intellectual battle with colonialism… le[d] them to
engage for the first time with global aesthetic issues.” For a scholar that believes in
“cultural hybridity” this statement seems incredibly essentialist, especially considering
the fact that India’s aesthetic parameters were always being reshaped and redefined.
Indeed, Mughal miniature painting, the “pinnacle” of the Indian artistic tradition, was the
result of Turkish, Mongolian, and Persian influences among many others.

It might be important here to dedicate a little time to the issue of cultural
essentialism. Walter Benn Michaels’ offers some valuable insight into the concept of
culture as a man-made reiteration of race, not (a set of practices resulting from) an
inherent quality of any given race.

Our sense of culture is characteristically meant to displace race, but... culture has
turned out to be a way of continuing rather than repudiating racial thought. It is
only the appeal to race that makes culture an object of affect and that gives
notions like losing our culture, preserving it, stealing someone else's culture,
restoring people's culture to them, and so on, their pathos. Our race identifies the
culture to which we have a right, a right that may be violated or defended,
repudiated or recovered. Race transforms people who learn to do what we do into
the thieves of our culture and people who teach us to do what they do into the
destroyers of our culture; it makes assimilation into a kind of betrayal and the
refusal to assimilate into a form of heroism. Without race, losing our culture can
mean no more than doing things differently from the way we do them and
preserving our culture can mean no more than doing things the same—the
melodrama of assimilation disappears. If, of course, doing things differently turns
out to mean doing them worse, then the change will seem regrettable. But it's not
the loss of our culture that will make it regrettable; it's the fact that the culture that
will then be ours will be worse than the culture that used to be ours. It is, of
course, always possible and often likely that things will get worse; abandoning
our idea of culture, however, will not make them worse.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.
This reading would suggest that any assertion of cultural essentialism (in the reading of art) is merely an assertion of racial ownership, which would seem far from helpful. The idea of multiple modernities is guilty of this problem as race comes to define artists, artworks, artistic techniques, and art historical interpretation. It suggests that only Indians can be a part of Indian modernism, and only Europeans can be a part of European modernism. It simplifies and restricts a textured history.

Mitter views modernism as an “aesthetic movement” not an ideological one. This aligns with the commonly asserted narrative that modernism was defined by the continued search for new visual artistic techniques. This background makes sense of Mitter’s claim that modernism began in India with “an ambitious exhibition of the works of Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and other Bauhaus artists held in Calcutta in 1922.”¹² Yet it is not merely this exposure to new techniques that the West provides for the East in this narrative, but also the basis of their content: “This first phase of modernism, which was an artistic expression of resistance to colonial rule, came to an end around 1947, the year of Indian independence.”¹³ Modernism in India begins and ends for Mitter with stylistic and thematic impetus of the West. He even states that, “the radical formalist language of modernism offered Indian artists… a new weapon of anti-colonialist resistance.”¹⁴ What immediately comes to mind once reading this account of modernism is the title of Audre Lorde’s introduction to her collection of essays, Sister Outsider: “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” Mitter’s account of modernism seems to suggest a dependency of the East on the West in modernism that he can never quite debunk because of its structural flaws. He states the nature of this

¹³ Ibid.
¹⁴ Ibid.
relationship even more explicitly when he claims that, “their shared outlook was possible not only through the printed media but also through hegemonic languages such as English and Spanish spread by colonial rule,”¹⁵ as if the ideas of modernism would not have been communicable or understood without the vestiges of colonialism.

Mitter finishes the prologue with the idea that modernism should be complicated more than it has been in the accepted narratives of art history. “Global ‘critical modernity’ has multilateral and multi-axial origins and reasons; its global impact forces us to revise a simple notion of cultural influence as a one-way flow of ideas from the West to other cultures.”¹⁶ Once more, Mitter emphasizes the ideological framework on which our understanding of modernism has always rested, not suggesting to break this framework, but merely to reinforce it via this well-meaning but misguided “celebration of plurality.”¹⁷

Perhaps the most telling result of this conception of modernism is the unhelpful way Mitter handles his discussion of Sher-Gil in his prologue.

The modernists idolized rural India as the true site of the nation, evolving artistic primitivism as an antithesis to colonial urban values. For the artists Sunayani Devi and Amrita Sher-Gil, village India became surrogate for their own predicament as women within the wider nationalist struggle.¹⁸

This uncomplicated understanding of Sher-Gil is exactly what I hope to overcome with the support of a different definition of modernism. Although rural India was idealized by nationalists, this was not the source nor the climactic purpose of primitivism in art. Additionally, Sunayani Devi’s narrative, like Sher-Gil’s, must be complicated, as discussed above, due to her extremely influential, affluent and talented family, the

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.
¹⁶ Ibid.
¹⁷ Ibid., 13.
¹⁸ Ibid., 10, 11.
Tagores. Aligning Sher-Gil with Devi’s reputation would not only deny the first half of Sher-Gil’s artistic career, but her education, her travels, and her documented complicated perspective. Finally, although Sher-Gil was in support of Indian independence, the movement hardly ever seemed to be at the center of her artistic considerations, nor was her “predicament” as a woman in the movement (Sher-Gil certainly deals with women’s issues in her work, but not with her specific position as a woman and Indian nationalist).

The impulse to nationalize and simplify Sher-Gil’s work is not confined to Mitter’s reading, however. Indeed of all of the scholarship on Sher-Gil that is available, only two writings address Sher-Gil’s work outside of an Indian context: Geeta Kapur’s *When Was Modernism: Essays on contemporary cultural practice in India*, and Saloni Mathur’s “A Retake of Sher-Gil’s Self-Portrait as Tahitian.” Even these do so unsatisfactorily. Kapur discusses Sher-Gil’s work and life in relation to Frida Kahlo, which proves to be a shallow comparison, leaving much to be desired in terms of an in-depth discussion of Sher-Gil’s work. Mathur’s article, as Mathur concedes, only suggests the hole in the scholarship, not dealing with the artwork in great detail, and indeed only considers one artwork. The rest of the scholarship on Sher-Gil that actually considers her artwork only discusses the latter half of her artistic production, and within that discussion, only suggests indigenous influences and motivations for Sher-Gil.

Interestingly, the majority of the literature on Sher-Gil is biographical. Even the pieces of scholarship that consider Sher-Gil’s work inevitably begin with a discussion of how beautiful, exotic and overtly sexual she was. This brings to mind Baddeley’s discussion of the general obsession with Frida Kahlo’s body and caricatured persona as paramount to her work.
One can draw obvious parallels to the appeal of Van Gogh… Yet despite the iconic status of Van Gogh’s ‘tragic’ life, it is the appearance of his work by which he is ultimately signified, his thick impasto brushstroke, his vibrant yellows, the urgency of his creative drive. In the case of Kahlo the popular image is of the artist herself, the characteristic brows, the elaborate hair, the Mexican costume. It is primarily her appearance, not the formal language of her art, that has graced the pages of *Elle* and *Vogue* magazines…

This sexist obsession with Kahlo’s body over her work is mainly asserted in popular culture, while at least in scholarship her work is considered significant and discussed as such. For Sher-Gil, however, this sexism exists both in her popular and scholarly representations.

Sexism aside, the issues that scholarship has faced when dealing with artists like Amrita Sher-Gil and Indian modernism in general are based in a problematic definition of the movement. In a scholarly exchange between T. J. Clark and Michael Fried, Fried criticizes Clark’s account of modernism, which is grounded in a reading of Clement Greenberg. The central problem for Fried in Clark’s reading of Greenberg is that, Clark accepts Greenberg’s reductionist and essentialist conception of the modernist enterprise that he is led to characterize the medium in modernism as ‘the site of negation and estrangement’—as pushed continually ‘to the point where it breaks or evaporates or turns back into mere unworked material’—and to assert that in modernism ‘negation appears as an absolute and all-encompassing fact…’

This assertion about modernism would suggest it to be defined by a relatively stable and inevitable timeline of aesthetic innovations. As one of the most important modernists alive today (and in the history of the field for that matter), Clark’s essentialist understanding of modernism suggests the centrality of the problem in the field. In order to understand modernism as an ideological shift rather than Clark’s and Mitter’s aesthetic

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progression, it might be best to turn to Stephen Melville’s critical account, *Philosophy Beside Itself, On Deconstruction and Modernism*.

In the first chapter of *Philosophy Beside Itself* entitled “On Modernism,” Melville offers an account of modernism that includes readings of Clement Greenberg, Stanley Cavell, and Michael Fried (in addition to various philosophers, such as Hegel, Kant, etc.). He begins by suggesting that the accepted hypothesis of Greenberg’s modernism is that “each art will have its own irreducible essence, and the modern history of each art will be that of its progressive paring away of the inessential as it moves toward an increasing awareness and display of the essential kernel.”21 However, Melville discusses the potential anxiety and ambiguity in Greenberg’s argument, specifically in his use of scare quotes around the term “purity.” This leads Melville to the assertion that Greenberg’s language that suggests this notion and its centrality to modern art is ideologically historical or ahistorical (historical in its self-criticism or ahistorical in the search for a ‘kernel of truth’). Melville explores this liminal space in Greenberg’s language, and expounds further on this idea by pointing out that Greenberg’s account of the emergence of modernism begins… not from a concern for the purity or rationality of the particular arts, but from a concern with the value of art at all… It is as if art suddenly found itself in a situation in which it became aware that it was capable of losing itself altogether—becoming ‘mere’ entertainment, devoid of larger relevance or authority—and so moved to reoccupy its own proper and wholly aesthetic ground as more or other than mere decoration.22

In this, Melville is beginning to lay out his argument explaining how modernism seems to be both an event in history and a nonevent in history, positing that this is the central idea for making sense of the movement. It is the (unfounded) fear of the death of art as a

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22 Ibid., 6.
meaningful expression of ideas that drives this self-criticism, and the aesthetic techniques used during the period were merely a means to attempt to assuage the perceived problem. “The history of modern art reduces to an unhappy episode, the confused attempt of art to maintain itself in a logical and aesthetic space.”\textsuperscript{23} However, as Melville points out the issue with the narrative of the progression of aesthetics and the refinement of art towards a ‘kernel of truth,’ “is one of error, of overestimation of the force of the rational criticism of the Enlightenment…‘Purity’ names precisely nothing,”\textsuperscript{24} for the fear of the death of art was an irrational one.\textsuperscript{25}

This fear revealed “a fundamental truth about art, and this truth is that it exists for a beholder… art will be decoration… unless it can master its relation to that beholder and make itself count for him or her.”\textsuperscript{26} Purifying art from its aesthetic frivolities to differentiate it from entertainment would assuage this fear of the death of art. When modernism can no longer rely on tradition to provide legitimacy in art, artists begin to close off the world of the painting; denying the viewer, and creating an independent reality in the painting could be a potential strategy for it to avoid becoming mere decoration—this strategy is known as absorption. However, this attempt “that is predicted on a denial of theatricality and a denial of the beholder… [is] doomed to critique and to failure. There is no way to absorption because absorption is, in the last analysis, a lie.”\textsuperscript{27}

There had been an underlying assumption in paintings that displayed absorptive subject matter, that there was something formal about painting that could avoid theatricality.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} It is important to note that because the fear of the death of art was real for the artists, “we are forced to speak of something like ‘purity’ as a central project for or aspiration of art. And with this double handling of ‘purity,’ we have installed a contradiction at the heart of modernism…” (Philosophy Beside Itself).
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 11.
(though there were always subtle acknowledgements of its inevitability). However, Edouard Manet intervened with *Olympia*, directly addressing the inherent limits of painting.

Melville brings in Michael Fried’s argument about this tectonic shift in art, manifested “[i]n [Manet’s *Olympia*] … Courbet’s enterprise [of complete viewer abolition] is reversed… it was necessary to establish the beholder’s presence abstractly…in order that the worst consequences of theatricalization of that relationship be averted” (Fried). With this shift, the spirit of the endeavor of art changes; when the viewer begins with the assumption that the painting is a mere object, the task of the painting is to overcome this classification (with, perhaps, only moments of success), without the aid of naturalism or tradition to fall back on. While trying to avoid the misfortunes of theatrical painting, modernism now subsumed theatricality into its vocabulary, voiding the space to which failed paintings had previously been relegated.

These terms [of absorption and theatricality] are not surpassed but redistributed in such a way that the absorptive project can and must be recognized as itself inherently theatrical—so that the only way to whatever can exist in the place ‘absorption’ set out to name is through an explicit acknowledgment of the theatricality of such an undertaking. The attempt to create pure and absorptive (nontheatrical) works is now bound to appear ‘merely theatrical.’

This discussion of the shift away from absorption as a technique to avoid theatricality leads Melville to his discussion of fraudulence, authenticity and finally a return to how modernism interacts with history.

Modernists feared the failure of art as a means of expression, a problem which artists attempted to solve by breaking away from history (while at the same time recalling it and grounding themselves in it); they took risks potentially producing fraudulent

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28 Ibid., 14.
pictures that might not necessarily be detectable as such by the artist, the critic, or the viewer. Melville cites Cavell’s “Music Discomposed,” which clarifies that the “risk of … fraudulence is more crucially defining of the modern than the apparent positive terms of… authenticity… insofar as it is the omnipresent possibility of fraudulence that determines our countervailing valorization of authenticity.”

Fraudulence was the driving force behind the search for authenticity, and therefore the driving force of modernism. And so, the history so simplified by a linear progression of aesthetic inventions and realizations seems to be merely consequential (and not necessarily linear) to the greater ideological driving forces of the fear of the failure of art and of fraudulence. In this light, “‘Modernism’ seems almost to invade history, [which] … is able to bear the weight both of radical rupture with the past and of resolution and of continuity within it.” Artists had recognized and appropriated objecthood as an inherent feature of their artwork; theatricality had always existed, but it was in this period that it was consciously evoked as part of the viewing process. Modernism does and does not have to be seen as separate from the rest of art history; the unique self-criticism of artists at this time allowed for a special kind of interaction with history that allowed them to consciously traverse it.

Melville ends the essay with Cavell’s closing sentiments in “Music Discomposed.” In a situation where the artist, the critic and the viewer do not know whether or not an artwork is fraudulent, Cavell suggests that art can only be judged accurately retrospectively.

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29 Ibid., 29.
30 Later in modernism it seems that the “fear of fraudulence” transforms into “interaction with the potential for fraudulence,” with artists like Marcel Duchamp playing with this distinction and Jackson Pollock fearing it.
31 Ibid., 18.
But my question is: What will time tell? That certain departures in art-like pursuits have become established (among certain audiences, in textbooks, on walls, in college courses); that someone is treating them with the respect due, we feel, to art; that one no longer has the right to question their status? But in waiting for time to tell that we miss what the present tells—that the dangers of fraudulence, and of trust are essential to the experience of art.32

For Cavell, because this division between the work’s contemporaneous culture and the culture able to “correctly” assess the work (with appropriate insight available only at some later date), it seems that the fear of fraudulence that has proven to be so central to the conception of modern art is easily forgotten or overlooked. However, the viewer would still have to make a decision for himself whether or not the artwork were successful, even if he were “proven wrong” at a later date. Cavell even states in his foreword that “[o]ne could say that in a modernist situation ‘past’ loses its temporal accent and means anything ‘not present.’ Meaning what one says becomes a matter of making one’s sense present to oneself.”33 In this sense, though the present assessment may be more precarious now that “successful” art can no longer be easily identified, the reaction of the contemporaneous viewer is still very much present. The success of these works could only be determined based on the object’s ability to transcend its potential fraudulence and inherent objecthood, to convey a meaning, a sense, or another world to the individual looking at it. When an object ceases to attempt to evoke meaning, and presents itself merely as an object, modernism has ended, or, on modernist terms, has failed.

The view of modernism as an aesthetic progression is not only Eurocentric, but also not nearly as dynamic or investigatory as the fraudulence viewpoint proves to be. When a scholar suggests, “modernism presents shifts in aesthetic techniques,” my first

32 Stanley Cavell, Must We Mean What We Say? (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), 188, 189.
33 Ibid., xix.
question would be “why did such shifts occur?” If the inevitable response were: “artists wished to find a purity in art,” I would once again counter with “why?” The answer to these questions can only be found in an ideological understanding of the movement, as detailed above. After pointing out the problems with contemporary conceptions of modernism, and providing a less problematic substitute, it might be best to bring Sher-Gil back into the conversation.

My criticism of art in India is leveled against clinging to traditions that were once vital, sincere and splendid and which are now merely empty formulae… I should like to see the art of India break away from both and produce something vital… through the medium of line, colour and design…

The dissatisfaction with traditional modes of artistic production and the willingness to break away from these traditions in search of some truth or essence seems to match the above-defined modernism exactly. As has been shown, when modernism is defined as a race towards new and different artistic techniques, it would be necessarily Eurocentric, setting up a rhetoric of center/periphery, and always implying the Euro-dependency of the peripheries. The above-defined modernism, which Sher-Gil herself seems to subscribe to, avoids these problems allowing an open discussion about Sher-Gil’s European influences to ensue.

I will argue in this thesis that Amrita Sher-Gil consciously evoked key ideologies, artworks and artists from the European modernist movement. I will suggest comparisons between Sher-Gil’s work and that of European modernists on the basis of aesthetic, ideological, and verbal evocations and similarities. The main purpose of this thesis is to suggest how central and significant Sher-Gil’s contribution is to modernism in light of her engagement with the dialogue of European modernists. As suggested in the above

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definition, modernists both referenced and departed from historical precedent, which thus unproblematically proves to be the case with Sher-Gil and the history of modernism. Hopefully by suggesting this large gap in Sher-Gil scholarship, a much larger gap in modernist scholarship itself will be revealed.
Chapter 1

Possessing Olympia

Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (fig. 1) shocked audiences and shook the foundations of the artistic tradition it both referenced and departed from. Depictions of nude women have been central to the western canon since the Renaissance. The viewer easily forgets the potential significance of nudity in images such as Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (fig. 2) and Goltzius’ *The Sleeping Danae* (fig. 3), as the nude female is a trope used as a vessel for the intended or “true” content.³⁵ *Olympia*’s nudity and her identity as defined by that nudity are positioned as the focal points of Manet’s painting, challenging the trope of the female nude in shocking ways. This forces the viewer to reconsider every element of the female nude that might have been taken for granted. The character of the woman, the context of her nudity, her relationship to the viewer, the position of the viewer, and the role of sexuality all confronted the contemporaneous viewer as issues needing resolution, with answers that only disturbed the viewer and further disrupted his³⁶ notions of norms and propriety.

Three decades later, Paul Gauguin expressed a deep interest in *Olympia*. He painted a copy of it (fig. 4), and even took a picture of the original with him when he traveled to Tahiti.³⁷ It is commonly asserted that *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (fig. 5), Gauguin’s portrait of his Tahitian wife, is his own “indigenized” version of *Olympia—as

³⁵ This refers to content that is at least significantly more relevant to understanding the work than the nudity of the subject.
³⁶ The privileged audience for this work, and all of the works I will be considering in this thesis, would have been the cultivated or leisured male viewer.
though this were yet another attempt to appropriate or take possession of the iconic work.

In his semi-autobiographical book, *Noa Noa*, Gauguin even records his wife Teha’amana’s reaction to the work. She “…looked with particular interest at a photograph of Manet’s *Olympia*. She told me that this Olympia was truly beautiful: I smiled at that opinion and was moved by it…She added, all of a sudden, breaking the silence over a thought: ‘It’s your wife’ ‘Yes,’ I lied. Me the *tane* of Olympia!”

The complex web of connections that Gauguin holds with *Olympia* suggests his deep desire to be connected with the work. He seems to have tried to place himself in the context of modernism to assert and to pinpoint his potential role within it.

Almost half a century later, Amrita Sher-Gil restarts and complicates this dialogue with her addition, *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* (fig. 6). Sher-Gil uses this work to align herself with the “fathers of modernism.” Even though *Olympia* uses the canonical framework in order to depart from it, the framework is still being used, reifying its power and suggesting its inevitable persistence. Sher-Gil does a few things to separate herself from the canonical vocabulary associated with female nude images. She removes the bed altogether, and stands up, in an active position, “…striking in her composure… resolutely female, self-possessed, and full of repose.”

She challenges the viewer to engage intellectually with her as a person and with her as a capable professional as he engages with her painting. She covers herself with an unpatterned cloth, calmly crossing her arms to reject the possibility of the viewer sexualizing her (she is in control of the content and the viewer’s gaze). Though her breasts remain exposed, they do not seem to be revealed

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to arouse the viewer, but rather to suggest strength derived from a necessarily female attribute, similar to *Olympia*’s dare for the viewer to sexualize her.

Sher-Gil also addresses racial, sexist, patriarchal, and exploitative issues raised by Gauguin’s re-appropriative *Spirit of the Dead Watching*. She superimposes a Tahitian identity onto her own for the sake of her painting, but does not take on the supplicant position of Teha’amana; instead, she displays herself as strong and capable. She gazes out to the horizon line, as though she need not be bothered with the viewer’s presence. She refashions the spirit into a discernibly male shadow, which surrounds her but remains behind her, controlled. *This* spirit is clearly molded by Sher-Gil’s figure, and could suggest a few different readings: her possession of male power, the reflection or shadow of the viewer, or her male European influences. She could be implying that she has the presence and power of a man in a decidedly female body. The straightforward positioning of the male spirit could suggest a reflection or shadow of the viewer. As he encountered his reflection or shadow, he would realize that Sher-Gil is in control of this extension of himself and therefore his viewing experience as she stands between the viewer his shadow or reflection. The spirit’s presence could also suggest Sher-Gil’s male influences from the world of European modern artists, retaining a definable yet subservient position to her fashioned persona. Regardless of the spirit’s identity, in this context, Sher-Gil is asserting her dominant position.

A Japanese screen serves as a background for the work, setting the scene for this play of identities. Sher-Gil’s choice to include this element could have several meaningful implications. It could be that she is foregrounding her lack of a distinct or

\[40\] I am referring to the figure that can be identified as the “watching spirit” in Gauguin’s *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (i.e. the figure clothed in darkness in the back left corner of the depicted room).
stable cultural identity. The act of Sher-Gil appropriating two cultures that were not her own (in the traditional sense) could imply a potentially relativist stance in terms of cultural heritage, as if she were saying that she might as well be connected with these disparate cultures, since she feels disconnected from any and all cultures. The inclusion of the screen could also be a direct reference to modern culture. During the period of European modernism, Japanese screens, prints, or woodblocks would be placed behind the subject of a portrait to show culture, distinction, and taste.41 In this way Sher-Gil could just be referencing a popular mode of social discourse that took place in visual culture during the modern period in Europe. Additionally, the presence of the print in Self-Portrait as Tahitian could be Sher-Gil’s overt engagement with a specific artistic conversation between two European modernists that had occurred half a century earlier.

Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin engaged in a famous portrait exchange in 1888. Van Gogh’s contribution was Self-Portrait as Bonze (Fig. 7), in which he appropriated the identity of a bonze, or Japanese Buddhist monk.42 Sher-Gil’s reference to this conversation between van Gogh and Gauguin is made explicit in her title. The conscious structure and word order of the title, Self-Portrait as Tahitian, directly parallels van Gogh’s title, Self-Portrait as Bonze. In terms of content, both Sher-Gil and van Gogh are playing with identity issues by creating self-portraits with superimposed physical

41 “In her self-portrait, Sher-Gil may have been seizing upon a common pictorial practice among nineteenth-century European painters of placing Japanese prints, objects, fabrics and motifs in the background of their portraits not merely for decorative effect but to enhance aspects of the sitter’s biography in some way…including Manet’s Portrait of Zola (1868), which presented the novelist seated at his desk below a Japanese screen and a Japanese woodcut print, along with other meaningful items…” (“A Retake of Sher-Gil’s Self-Portrait as Tahitian” 528). Though Mathur points to Emile Zola (fig. 10) as an illustrative example for this point, it will be argued later in this chapter that Zola’s portrait was a part of the artistic conversation starting with Manet and continued by Sher-Gil.

42 There may also be a connection with Umibozu (“Sea Bonze”), which was a spirit in Japanese folklore. This could add even more depth to Sher-Gil’s reference in terms of its potential thematic connections with Spirit of the Dead Watching.
attributes on “themselves” that are associated with a heritage other than their own. Sher-Gil could be attempting to connect her work with that of van Gogh by signaling a similar appropriation of Japanese heritage through her inclusion of the Japanese backdrop in Self-Portrait as Tahitian.

Paul Gauguin’s contribution to this 1888 exchange was his Self-Portrait (Les Misérables) (fig. 8), created before his trip to Tahiti. The importance and meaning of this work can be seen most clearly when compared with Self-Portrait (fig. 9), created after his trip to Tahiti. In many ways these two portraits are duplicates of one another (one cannot help but note the almost identical depiction of the face and the similar location of the compositional elements), yet the differences speak volumes. In Self-Portrait (Les Misérables), it is commonly suggested that Gauguin has placed a profile portrait of himself as Jean Valjean43 in the corner of the composition, facing his central self-depiction. The fact that Gauguin had to distort the composition to make sure the Spirit was included in his Self-Portrait, the correlated location of the Jean Valjean depiction with that of the spirit, and the absolute profile depictions of both the Jean Valjean depiction and the spirit, might suggest a shared identity between the two. This might imply that Gauguin felt a facet of his own identity to be a kind of spirit haunting him. Furthermore, the inclusion of the patterned linen44 in the physical room depicted in Self-Portrait, with the Spirit of the Dead Watching lurking behind, might imply that Gauguin had taken on the identity of Teha’aman. The perhaps unwanted appropriation of this female position would imply that the spirit role in Self-Portrait would be taken on by

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43 Jean Valjean is the misunderstood protagonist of Les Misérables.
44 This is the same patterned linen that Teha’amana lies on in Spirit of the Dead Watching, suggesting that Gauguin is drawing a connection between himself and the narrative depicted in Spirit of the Dead Watching.
Gauguin’s own work, suggesting that his work was haunting him, foregrounding his own inability to save himself from this supplicant position. Perhaps Gauguin still felt the insatiable urge to possess *Olympia*. By painting this *Self-Portrait* as a reflection in a mirror, *Spirit of the Dead Watching* is flipped, aligning more closely with the original composition of *Olympia*. The location of *Spirit of the Dead Watching* in *Self-Portrait* can also be directly correlated with the location of a depiction of *Olympia* in the background of Manet’s portrait of Emile Zola (fig. 10), which would align *Spirit of the Dead Watching* with *Olympia* once again. However, there seems to be another portrait that might be more relevant to Sher-Gil’s direct line of reference.

Van Gogh’s *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (fig. 11) was created after the relationship and the artistic exchange between van Gogh and Gauguin was broken off. Van Gogh includes a Japanese print in the background of this self-portrait, which could be the reference point for Sher-Gil’s similar backdrop. Van Gogh’s self-portrait is also important for understanding the spirit behind Sher-Gil in *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* as a representation of her male modernist influences. One might observe that the only distinguishable feature of the spirit is its lone ear. Sher-Gil, as a continuation of the

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45 Since we can tell this is a mirror image because *Spirit of the Dead Watching* is backwards, the positioning of the painting as the spirit would correlate to the position of the spirit in the original *Spirit of the Dead Watching* in the implied “real” space of *Self-Portrait*. This mirror effect points to the fact that Gauguin has combined his position as the viewer and his wife’s position as the subject of *Spirit of the Dead Watching*. As the subject he looks, terrified, to himself in the mirror, yet the mirror version of himself can offer nothing but a reflection of terror.

46 By this, I am suggesting that Gauguin would take on the position of Teha’amana in this narrative. Even though this would put him in a supplication position, this painting still exists suggesting his failure to “save himself from his art” or the metaphorical spirit.

47 It is also important that Emile Zola was a contemporary of Victor Hugo (author of *Les Misérables*). Apparently, Hugo also felt anxieties about the comparatively high popularity of Zola, whose style was deemed more naturalistic. This adds another layer of complexity, considering Gauguin’s earlier *Self-Portrait (Les Misérables)* included Gauguin as a character from Hugo’s work.

48 The triangular shapes repeated in the rooftops in the Japanese print behind van Gogh and the easel on his other side, might correlate with the rooftops behind Sher-Gil, which seem oddly out of place in the interior space depicted in the print.
spirit’s form, has covered her ears, leaving only one ear visible in their combined presence. Though this might perhaps be a stretch, van Gogh’s infamous story would have been widely known during Sher-Gil’s lifetime, and, as demonstrated in this paper, Sher-Gil had an engaged relationship with van Gogh’s life and artistic production. If one were to read the spirit as the presence of her European influences, what feature, I ask, would be the most distinctive out of all of these “fathers of modernism” to depict? What single feature would lead one’s mind directly to that artist (those artists), that time period, that place, and that artistic movement? What would invoke the artistic conversation detailed above? In order to further the visual conversations of the “fathers of modernism,” there is an implication that Sher-Gil can be inspired by these men, without being shackled by their faults. Her ability to place her hair over her ears, visibly hiding them without physically cutting them off, suggests her ability to invoke their genius on her terms, to embody their virtues without internalizing their vices.

Finally, Sher-Gil creates Woman on Charpoy (fig. 12) “ambitiously, by way of Édouard Manet’s Olympia,” as though she, like Gauguin, needed to possess the iconic work in more ways than one.49 Sher-Gil addresses different problems in her re-take of this succession of reference, deference, and difference discussed above. Woman on Charpoy is not a painting of self-assertion or self-positioning in the same way that Self-Portrait as Tahitian is. Although Woman on Charpoy is an assertion that Sher-Gil is capable and worthy of visually conversing with the fathers of modernism, its central theme seems to be more socially motivated.

49 Ibid., 522.
The *Woman on Charpoy* lies fully clothed and face-up on her resting place; she is positioned perhaps in a way more comparable to *Olympia* than to Teha’aman. Therefore, she is placed in a position of greater agency, but simultaneously, one of greater controversy. This similarity of positioning between the *Woman on Charpoy* and *Olympia* causes the viewer to associate certain qualities with this woman, perhaps recognizing more immediately that she is a manifestation of sexuality, and that her sexuality has stirred up some type of controversy. Indeed, for Sunduram, *Woman Resting on Charpoy* seems to exude a quiet perceptive understanding of the psychology of the feudal Indian woman. We sense that beneath her apparently restful pose there is turmoil of suppressed desires. We are made to feel a shocking intimacy with the woman by her erotically suggestive pose and the titled charpoy which puts us immediately above her. Yet though she seems to lie passively, there is a restless movement in the woman which suggests the painful birth of an awareness. A consciousness of the restraints imposed on by her social environment.

Whereas Gauguin’s picture focuses on amplifying the sexuality of the subject, Sher-Gil’s emphasizes the suppression of it. While Teha’amana is made as available as possible to the viewer, her buttocks exposed, her body diagonally placed, as if sliding towards the viewer, Sher-Gil’s female subject is completely covered, and diagonally placed so that her lower body points away from the viewer. Although Teha’amana’s body and persona is sexualized by Gauguin, Sher-Gil seems only to be recording the subject’s heightened and unavoidable sexuality, which seems to come from within the subject, projecting outwards, into the viewer’s space.

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50 A charpoy is a hemp cot or string bed.
52 She wears a Kurta (fig. 13)—an item of clothing that is meant to obscure genitalia, breasts and buttocks, to de-sexualize the wearer (Afroz Taj [Associate Professor, Department of Asian Studies, UNC-Chapel Hill] in discussion with the author, July 2012).
While the Spirit in Gauguin’s work adds to the glorified primitive quality of Teha’amana through amplifying her sexual appeal by suggesting naïveté, a mysterious quality, and a potential need for a paternal figure, the being that has taken the position of Spirit in *Woman on Charpoy* is actively suppressing the main subject’s sexuality. This Spirit could be identified as the subject’s family member, most likely as her mother. As a non-imaginary presence, the mother’s reason for haunting the subject becomes apparent. She takes on a protective function, though still one of domination. She sits in a close proximity to the viewer, enclosing the main subject with her body (as her upper body extends above the main figure, and the Spirit’s lower body extends visibly below the cot containing the main figure). The fan she holds serves to symbolically cool the passions of the main subject, and seems almost weapon-like in its shape and the position in which it is held—emphasizing the dominating quality of the Spirit.

The conflicted sexuality of Sher-Gil’s subject becomes palpable through her expression, positioning, and trappings. “Sher-Gil used the color red to convey a distinctive ‘semiotics of desire,’ one that expressed both woman's sexual yearning and the repression of female sexuality in the subcontinent.” As though penned in, the posts of her cot, an intense red-orange, surround and enclose the main subject. When describing

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53 As opposed to the “spirit” in *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, the “spirit” in *Woman on Charpoy* appears to be a physical presence, not a manifestation of the main subject’s fantasy. While Gauguin’s spirit lurks in the background, Sher-Gil’s interacts with the main subject as she is pushed into the same space as the subject. The physicality of Sher-Gil’s spirit is emphasized by her proximity to the subject, her centrality, the suggestion that her body occupies physical space (her foot appears under the charpoy suggesting the presence of a body within the space), and the object she holds in her hand. Sher-Gil’s spirit holds a fan (fig 14, 15), suggesting that she is capable of affecting the movement of the air with her physical motions, something an imaginary figure or a spiritual figure would be unable to do.

54 While there are several different shapes that Sher-Gil could have made the hand fan (fig. 15 for example), she depicts one that could reference the shape of ceremonial Indian axes from the 19th century (fig. 16).

55 Mathur, “A Retake of Sher-Gil’s Self-Portrait as Tahitian,” 522.
the painting, Sher-Gil notes “its posts of an incandescent red rose round her like tongues of flame… [as i]t is a sensual picture.”

The flower-adorned blue fabric that presents Teha’amana to the viewer of *Spirit of the Dead Watching* and reinforces the indigenous setting of the work, is strewn on the floor by the restless *Woman on Charpoy*, suggesting a conflicted, yet strong, restlessness. The subject’s right arm and left leg open to the viewer, while her left arm and right leg enclose her body, making her less accessible to the viewer. She wears an entirely red kurta, pajama and scarf ensemble (fig. 13), which Sher-Gil used to evoke a “semiotics of desire,” but which nonetheless completely obscures her body from view. Though the subject looks up at the viewer from her cot (which, as Sunduram suggests, is an alluring element), the perimeter of the cot keeps her separate from the viewer. The post of the cot proves closer to the viewer than the subject, touching the bottom of the frame, pushing outward. The depicted space of the room reveals a tension between a potential shallowness and a potential depth as the table sporting a pot and cup sits firmly across the room, while the floor line pushes out, almost creating a semi-circle with intense obtuse angles where the walls meet (suggesting a shallow space). This tension seems to display the psychology of the *Woman on Charpoy*, as the space seems to collapse in on her.

With these conflicted elements of sexuality, Sher-Gil complicates the situation of the “indigenized” Olympia of Gauguin’s *Spirit of the Dead Watching*. *Woman on Charpoy* is Sher-Gil’s active communication of the reality of the situation for a common female in Asia; Gauguin, in opposition, seems only to include Teha’amana as an element for the pleasure of the European male viewer. As Mathur and Sunduram suggest, the

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57 Mathur, “A Retake of Sher-Gil’s Self-Portrait as Tahitian, 522.
painting addresses the active suppression of female sexuality in India as a method of protection against rape, impurity, disease, shame, and unwanted pregnancy. Instead of putting restraints on men, women were encouraged to stay in the home. In the half century preceding independence there was a huge push to keep women pure and associated with the interior world of the home. While nationalists claimed to argue for women’s rights during the fight for independence, these arguments rarely had women’s best interests at heart. As *Woman on Charpoy* was created during the main thrust of these talks, Sher-Gil, no doubt, is questioning how much freedom really has been or will be won for women in India.

*Olympia*’s engagement with the viewer involves his own implication by pointing out his expectations regarding art and the female nude. Gauguin’s contribution, *Spirit of the Dead Watching* involves ascribing to a kind of mystical experience, all the while validating paternalistic, colonialist, etc. associations. Sher-Gil’s intervention into the long conversation with *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* is about engaging with this conversation, self-positioning, and cultural ambiguity, but it is also about redefining the female nude, a theme that will be discussed at length in Chapter 4. Six years later, when Sher-Gil was fully invested in portraying the “essence” of India, she created *Woman on Charpoy*, an image more clearly referencing *Spirit of the Dead Watching*. Playing on the sexualized, indigenous Teha’amana, Sher-Gil depicts the suppression of sexuality for women in rural Asia as a problem needing a solution. The tension created for the viewer is not one of arousal, but of disturbance. Sher-Gil’s intelligent re-animation of modernist dialogues serves not only as interesting in terms of European modernist considerations, but also as
relevant to and indicative of Sher-Gil’s objectives as an artist and a woman at those designated and specific moments in her career.
Figures: Chapter 1

Figure 1. *Olympia*, Édouard Manet, 1863

Figure 2. *Venus of Urbino*, Titian, 1538

Figure 3. *The Sleeping Danae Being Prepared to Receive Jupiter*, Hendrik Goltzius, 1603
Figure 4. *Olympia* (Gauguin’s Copy of Manet’s *Olympia*), Paul Gauguin, 1891

Figure 5. *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, Paul Gauguin, 1892
Figure 6. *Self-Portrait as Tahitian*, Amrita Sher-Gil, 1934
Figure 7. Self-Portrait as Bonze, Vincent van Gogh, 1888
Figure 8. Self-Portrait: Les Misérables, Paul Gauguin, 1888
Figure 9. Self-Portrait, Paul Gauguin, 1892.
Figure 10. Émile Zola, Édouard Manet, 1868
Figure 11. Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear, Vincent van Gogh, 1889

Figure 12. Woman on Charpoy, Amrita Sher-Gil, 1940-1941
Figure 13. Example of common kurta, pajama, and scarf ensemble

Figure 14. Example of fan shape depicted in *Woman on Charpoy.*

Figure 15. Example of a traditional hand fan.

Figure 16. Indian ceremonial axe, 19th century
Chapter 2

Subverted Expectations:

The Picasso Relationship

Sexuality, interiority, and vanity characterize the subjects of Amrita Sher-Gil’s and Pablo Picasso’s early work. Similarities found in the work of these artists are by no means a coincidence; Sher-Gil’s respect for Picasso’s artistic prowess is well documented. Her extremely salient reference to Paul Gauguin with her Self-Portrait as Tahitian, as discussed in Chapter 1, invites the viewer to look with an investigative eye at the rest of her work. It is important to note that Self-Portrait as Tahitian was a manifesto of sorts, and that Sher-Gil’s other works do not address the modernist dialogue in such an obvious manner. However it will be demonstrated that notable similarities are present, suggesting that these influences remained informative for Sher-Gil throughout her artistic career. Though early on, her stylistic choices reflect the post-impressionistic inclination of her L'École des Beaux-Arts mentor, Simon (figs. 17, 18), Sher-Gil’s subject matter closely parallels that of Picasso from three decades earlier. The variable nature of human interaction is a central theme for understanding these works as opposing or aligning psychologies of the subjects push against the confining borders of the canvases. Sher-Gil and Picasso both explore and exploit group dynamics and social norms, leaving the viewer dissatisfied if not uncomfortable.

Young Girls (fig. 19) is an early painting by Sher-Gil that exhibits the post-impressionistic style characteristic of her mentor Simon. Initially the subject matter of
this work may seem comparable to the familiar themes explored by Simon, however, the longer one examines *Young Girls*, the stranger, and more alien it becomes. Unlike Simon’s relatable depictions of frivolity and everyday life, Sher-Gil seems to have used an archetypal social situation (an afternoon meal) as a pretense for a much more complicated interaction. The interpersonal complexities explored in *Young Girls* and the equation of life with the staged is something that Picasso examined extensively in his early work (in fact these issues seem to be his focus). Paintings such as *Harlequin’s Family* (fig. 20) produce the same effect on the viewer—an initial impression of normalcy that is quickly and increasingly violated with one’s continued gaze. Upon closer inspection, even more similarities become apparent.

An extremely complex scenario unfolds for the viewer, who becomes trapped in the ideological grasp of *Young Girls*. When the viewer realizes that the figure on the right is naked from the waist up, he must backtrack in his uncomplicated understanding of the painting and the relationship of the figures. The nudity is hidden from the viewer by the position of the figure’s body—which I am conflicted to identify as a *profil perdu*—and by her flowing golden locks of hair. Indeed her hair serves as a tool and a symbol of her female power over the other figure in the painting and over the viewer and his gaze. The importance and power of her hair is reiterated by the comb she holds in her hand. The figures fall into the roles of seducer and seduced as signified by the objects they hold. The plate of cherries becomes a symbol of sexual arousal in the figure on the left, as discussed below, identifying her as the seduced figure. The comb comes to suggest the self-fashioning and role-appropriation involved in the process of seduction, identifying the blond woman as the seducer. Indeed the comb would have positioned the blond hair
of this woman to expose and accentuate her chest. Schapiro suggests the importance of held objects in identifying the agency and role of a particular subject in Picasso’s work, noting the central themes of “seeing and manipulation, the strong forces of the eye and the hand.”\textsuperscript{58} The potential of these themes is played out in \textit{Young Girls} with these held objects and with the exchange of loaded gazes, which will be unpacked below. Whereas a cursory reading of the painting as an afternoon lunch would have implied equal power between the two figures, upon closer inspection it appears that the power is unevenly divided; the blond figure clearly holds greater influence in the work. This shift of power subverts the misconception that lesbian sexuality was naturally different than heterosexual sexuality... And somehow reaching sexual ecstasy with a woman lover would never involve any kind of power struggle. Women were different... The fact of the matter was that all these power struggles of 'having' and 'being had' were being played out in my own bedroom.\textsuperscript{59}

Once again, assumptions regarding normative relationships and situations have been set up only to be undermined. It is with her nudity, usually a symbol of subjugation and powerlessness, that the blond figure is able to control the situation. Indeed the viewer might identify with the dark-haired woman both in his observation of the blond woman, and in his powerlessness in this viewing experience; the blond woman controls where and how he looks. This parallelism and potential uncomfortable identification of the viewer and the dark-haired woman may be short-lived, as discussed below.

After the viewer has dealt with the strange occurrence of nudity, he must come to terms with the reaction of the other figure. This person is defying her traditional role as a

\textsuperscript{58} Meyer Schapiro, “Picasso’s Woman with a Fan,” \textit{Modern Art: 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} Centuries- Selected Papers}, ed. Meyer Schapiro (George Braziller, Inc.: New York, 1979), 117.
woman to respond to the occurrence of nudity in a socially acceptable way, which might include embarrassment or shame. In fact, she has the exact opposite reaction as she blatantly stares at the exposed chest, obviously distracted. The plate of cherries she holds betrays the extent to which her attention has wandered as it slowly slides down her lap and out of the grasp of her forgetful hands. The sexualized energy in the room becomes palpable as the significance of the cherries (a symbol for sexuality located near her genitalia) becomes salient. This is not just a lunch, and this fruit is not just a snack. “The association of fruit with an erotic figure in a process of displacement or substitution,” is a technique Cézanne explored. “The central place given to the apples in a theme of love [in The Amorous Shepherd and]… the association here of fruit and nudity [suggests] … a displaced erotic interest… Through its attractive body, beautiful in color, texture and form, by its appeal to all the senses and promise of physical pleasure, the fruit is a natural analogue of ripe human beauty…” Schapiro even notes one specific case in Cézanne’s oeuvre where a figure was replaced by still-life objects to, “defus[e] … a sexual theme.”

This comparison might prove all the more interesting if one considers the plate of cherries in Young Girls as a quotation of Cézanne’s Still Life with a Plate of Cherries.

It is important to note that the plate of cherries may serves as a quotation of Cézanne and Manet. The positioning of the plate seems to align most closely with Cézanne’s Still Life with a Plate of Cherries (fig. 21). Both plates are almost perfect circles, instead of ellipses, suggesting they lean more towards the viewer than they could without the cherries falling; this allows for all of the contents of the plates to be revealed

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61 Ibid., 5, 6.
62 Ibid., 12.
to the viewer (tipping the hand of the painting as it were). The way the stems of the cherries break up the white rim of the plate in the two compositions is also very similar. As the above evidence indicates, this visual quotation would suggest sexual or erotic content in a displaced way. However, the feelings the plate of cherries evoke in *Young Girls* might prove a comparison with Manet’s work even more valuable. Consider the way the cherries are spilling out of the hands of *The Boy with Cherries* (fig. 22). Consider the distracted way that the *Street Singer* (fig. 23) eats her cherries as she stares at the viewer, balancing the fruit on her forearm as she holds her instrument nonchalantly in her hand. It might be important to note here that in a letter to Denise Proutaux, Sher-Gil referred to *Young Girls* as a painting in which Proutaux and Indira were “stuffing [them]selves with cherries.” While the *Young Girls* do not engage in physical (or exterior) activity, but instead engage in an interior dialogue, the *Street Singer* does consume her cherries. This might suggest that Sher-Gil thought about *Young Girls* in terms of *Street Singer*. One might even consider the way that the *Street Singer*’s skirt is slightly raised to reveal just the tips of her shoes, as well as the way the door behind her is slightly ajar, elements that could be compared to the lifted skirt of the blonde figure and the just open bureau in *Young Girls*. The most convincing similarity between *Young Girls* and *Street Singer* however is the tone of languor that pervades the pieces. Note the

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63. Indeed there are multiple cherries in the *Street Singer*’s right hand as she puts it to her mouth, which is obscured by the cherries. It is interesting that the two means for her to identify with the role prescribed to her by the title have been denied or muted—she carries her instrument with a complete lack of attention, and her mouth has been completely covered (and presumably filled with cherries). These elements may have something to do with Manet’s tendency to create works that intentionally deny a successful or fully cohesive narrative. This type of discrepancy seems to appear in the active way Sher-Gil talks about the work, and the muted yet charged reality of the painting. This theme might have been reiterated with the painting’s alternative title, “Conversation.” This title suggests an activity that does not seem to be occurring in the work. There is no gesturing, the figures do not lean in towards each other, instead slumping back in their chairs, there is not sustained eye contact, their faces are relatively expressionless, etc. Perhaps by identifying *Young Girls* with actions that the subjects are not actually engaged in, Sher-Gil sets up the lie of the painting that can only be contradicted upon inspecting its content.
careless way that the street singer holds her instrument (presumably a vital necessity for her occupation), as though she were letting it slip from her fingers, though it remains in place. This can be compared to the careless way the dark-haired figure in *Young Girls* is letting the plate of cherries slowly slide from her hands. The way that the street singer engages with the audience is not with an intense gaze (like, for example, *Olympia’s* gaze), but rather a nonplussed stare, which betrays neither surprise nor interest. While the sexual nature of the subjects’ relationship in *Young Girls* is clear, the way they engage with this tension is not through a sexual act, embarrassment, avoidance, or any other action, but through inactive reflection and inert reverie. Since this tone proved to be such prevalent theme in Manet’s work, it seems intentional that the tone of *Young Girls* is so similar to that of *Street Singer*. Finally, consider the strange interaction that is occurring in *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe* (fig. 24), and how a predictable situation like a picnic has strayed into very unlikely territory. Note the cherries spilling out of the picnic basket in *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe* as the main figures continue their discourse, far from bothered.⁶⁴ These elements in Manet’s paintings suggest that the way he used and conceived of cherries as a metaphorical tool is very similar to the way Sher-Gil has employed them in *Young Girls*. Therefore, the plate of cherries, a seemingly small compositional inclusion, sets up expectations for this interaction (a lunch), subverts them with sexual connotations, suggests the psychology of the figure that holds it, and connotes modernist influences with visual and thematic similarities to the work of Cézanne and Manet.

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⁶⁴ Another similarity between the two paintings is the selectively shifted perspective. The perspective of the picnic basket and clothing in the left corner of the work has been skewed to look like it has been pushed out towards the viewer. If one were to look at the skewed perspective of the side table in *Young Girls*, one might note that it too has been pushed out towards the viewer (note the almost perfect circle of the table’s surface).
Each element of *Young Girls* has been carefully arranged to create this ever-changing narrative in the viewer’s mind. The relationship of the figures is further detailed as the viewer notices the positioning of their feet, changing their relationship from one of looking to one of touching or almost touching. The right foot of the blonde figure just peeks out from under her skirt, shoeless. The right foot of the other figure is placed so that the physical relationship of the feet of the two women is hard to clarify. However, whether the feet are touching, or almost touching provides perhaps an equitable amount of emotional and physical electricity. Since the right foot of the blonde figure points in the same direction as her breast, is similarly bare, and peeks out from under her gauzy skirt, just as her breast draws back her curtain of silvery hair, it can be seen as a substitute or reiteration of the exposure. Perhaps the dark-haired woman, though not brazen enough to reach out and touch the breast of the blonde figure, is willing to partake in a close second, her tender exposed foot. As has been argued, hands and feet serve to be some of the most informative elements in this work; this mode of expression is used to great effect by Picasso, as will be discussed below.

The viewer, after exhausting every element of body language in *Young Girls*, searching for any element that might suddenly make sense of the strange interaction he has accidently stumbled upon, must retreat and finally take a look at himself. He has been trying to understand a relationship that was intentionally constructed to mislead him and play on his assumptions about women, sexuality, social norms, and art. If this is not an object for his viewing pleasure or possession, then this is not art as he had previously understood it. Suddenly the piece takes on an active role, asserting a type of dominance over the viewer. In life one is not expected to understand every situation one encounters,
because one never has all of the information. One simply must attempt to understand a situation as far as the information leads, and then either interact with the situation to glean more information, or accept a lack of understanding and move on. *Young Girls* creates a similar situation for the viewer, but does not give him the option of asking for more information.

*Young Girls* also goes further than a normal everyday life situation in that it presents an extremely intimate moment. All of the viewer’s staring and analyzing is suddenly reflected on, as he has adopted a voyeuristic role without realizing it. In fact, the very things he may have been condemning in the figure on the left (her lack of surprise, guilt, embarrassment, shame, etc.) he now must defend in himself. In fact the viewer is implicated even further because, unlike the woman on the left who is obviously meant to be in the room, and who openly views her counterpart, the viewer has not been invited, and must be gawking at the figures from a hidden vantage point\(^\text{65}\) (perhaps through a slightly open door, which would be reflected in the ajar door of the wardrobe behind the figures). Therefore, although he might have identified with the dark-haired figure initially in observing the blonde figure’s nudity and being subjected to her power, he can no longer even identify with her. He has been pushed out of the narrative of the work. This theme of excluding the viewer (especially from female, sexually-charged spaces) is one that Sher-Gil continues to develop in works like *Torso*, as will be discussed in Chapter 4. Though he must eventually walk away, the viewer is forced to reflect on the way he interacted with the composition from the moment he encountered it.

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\(^{65}\) The figures do not notice anyone watching them, as they interact familiarly, therefore the viewer must be looking at them from a hidden position.
The interplay between introspection and voyeurism is a complexity that Picasso also addresses in works such as Harlequin’s Family (fig. 20). What might have been a typical scene of familial affection has been turned into a display vanity and voyeurism to the point of where the figures are unapologetically neglecting their familial responsibilities. A scene that might have displayed love and sacrifice has been transformed into an exhibition of lust and selfishness. A male figure stares at a pristine nude woman. He carries their child (similar to the figure on the left in Young Girls, who also holds also a symbol of her sexualized relationship), but devotes all of his attention to his wife. The female figure has let her sheer white garment fall to the ground to reveal her glowing form. Similarly, the blonde figure in Young Girls has let her sheer white garment fall to reveal her porcelain skin. This reveal has led to obvious desire in their counterparts, to the point of neglecting their responsibilities (maintaining the plate of cherries, and maintaining the child). “The curtain is drawn” on the harlequin’s family much like the door of the wardrobe behind the Young Girls has been opened just slightly to metaphorically reveal the scene. Even the side table in Young Girls is in the same location as makeshift table beside the Harlequin’s Family (with similarly distorted perspective).

The ambiguity for the viewer regarding the physical relationship of the figures in Harlequin’s Family lies in the inclusion of the mirror and the confusion of perspective. It seems as though the harlequin is either standing slightly in front of, or parallel to his wife (especially based on the relative positioning of their feet). However, it looks like he is looking over his shoulder in order to gaze at her. Their height might have indicated their

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66 Inferring from the title, the male figure may be referred to as a harlequin, the female figure may be referred to as his wife, and the child in the painting may be referred to as their child.
physical relationship, but his hat and her hair obscure the possibility of an accurate comparison. He seems to be bathing in darkness, while she is glowing brightly (and neither of them have shadows), so no definable light source is available to give information regarding their relationship. It is also disorienting because the dark sections of a composition are usually perceived as pushing outward. However, this effect, for the harlequin, is completely eclipsed by the glowing white female figure that immediately takes center stage due to her ethereal luminosity and undeniable beauty (coming to the forefront of the viewer’s attention). The inability of the viewer to ascertain how these figures are interacting physically can be equated with the confusion elicited regarding their emotional connection. If the harlequin is right next to her, the wife could be glancing at him in her peripheral vision, perhaps coyly attempting to arouse him under the pretense of fixing her hair. However, if he is standing behind her, looking over his shoulder, she could not be looking at him through the mirror (the shading and positioning make this impossible), so this becomes an image of her vanity and his unappreciated appreciation of her.

The hands and feet are as emphasized in *Harlequin’s Family* as they are in *Young Girls*. The defined foot of the harlequin points directly to his wife, indicating that she has captured the entirety of his attention. The child’s hand rests on the harlequin’s shoulder as the only element holding it up. This emphasizes the fact that his attention solely rests on his wife. The woman’s feet point away from her husband, indicating that, most likely, her attention is completely focused on herself. Her “spider-like hands” only serve to reflect her vanity, as one holds a mirror and the other fixes her hair.

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67 This results from atmospheric perspective.
The viewer does not take the role of a peeping Tom in *Harlequin’s Family*, but instead places himself in the harlequin’s position (the figure’s blacked out eyes deny him his own presence). The immediate obsession with the beauty of his wife and the inability to truly focus on anything but her luminous body is evident in the harlequin’s reaction, as well as that of the viewer. Like the viewer of the *Young Girls*, the viewer of the *Harlequin’s Family* becomes a gazer of a nude female that is differentiated from the traditional nude. Instead of being presented for the domination of the male viewer, she exposes herself for her own purposes and pleasure, even using this to assert a kind of dominance over the viewer. In both of these cases the women have control over their own bodies, and play with their sexuality on their own terms. Picasso and Sher-Gil have both, therefore, taken classical scenes of domestic and social life and completely subverted the associated expectations. These changes force a comparison between these works and the genres they reference, adding to their alien nature, and providing a puzzle for the viewer to solve (or try to solve).

Sher-Gil and Picasso also shared an interest in “group paintings”—works that display cryptic human relationships in confined spaces. In these group paintings, ambiguity reigns thematically supreme as recognizable social situations are notably absent. Any expectations that one might have had for the genre-bending *Young Girls* or *Harlequin’s Family* cannot set these group paintings into an ideological framework, because there is no referenced genre and therefore there are no associated expectations. In this type of painting, both artists deemphasize most of the body, creating stretches of colored canvas to which the viewer cannot attach any rational intellectual or emotional response, leading to the viewer’s eventual alienation as he is stuck in interpretive no-
man’s land. The viewer is forced either to ascribe meanings to the questionable relationships, or to accept that the canvas does not contain enough information to ascertain the actual inner thoughts of the figures—neither of which is satisfying. The only elements of the body that are emphasized are the hands, feet, and faces as the most expressive and identifiable elements of the subjects; these elements are presented as the only clues for understanding the depicted relationships—serving as tantalizing morsels of information to keep the viewer convinced that this is a puzzle that can indeed be solved if properly studied.

Before analyzing the compositional elements, it must be noted that the normal markers of identity, personality, and relationship of the subjects in Sher-Gil’s *Hill Men and Woman* (fig. 25) are almost completely absent. Indeed, Sher-Gil goes one step further than Picasso in his *Poor People on the Sea Shore* (fig. 26). Whereas the gender, general age, and probable relationship of the subjects of Picasso’s work can be identified and used in the attempt to analyze the narrative of the work, gender, age and relationship are almost impossible to determine in Sher-Gil’s painting as recognizable physical markers of biological gender have been obfuscated. It can be assumed that the central and right figures are male because they wear turbans, and that the figure on the left is a woman because she wears a translucent headscarf, but past this, it is impossible to tell, and more importantly, pointless. Anatomical markers of gender are completely absent. Facial structure does not indicate more feminine or masculine attributes. Indeed, the size, stature, and shape of the woman seems to be intentionally obscured by the positioning of her body. In Picasso’s work, the central figure can be quickly identified as a man due to his short hair, abundant facial hair, and more revealing clothing, including pants. The
figure on the left can be defined as a woman by her diminished size in comparison with
the man, her clothing, which is concealing, and includes what seems to be a skirt, and her
hair, which is long, well-kempt, and styled in a bun. The small figure can be identified as
a boy because of his short hair, his more revealing clothing, and his pants. The age of the
figures can be determined by their size (the adults being large, and the child being small)
and their features (the man’s beard is grey and white, and the woman’s hair is streaked
with grey). Their ragged clothing indicates their social status as being poor and
potentially homeless, suggesting an entire narrative of their lives, moods, etc. Because of
their gender and age, it would be relatively safe to assume that these three make up a
family. The age of Sher-Gil’s figures could range anywhere from pre-teenaged to late
twenties, early thirties. Their relationship is not easily identifiable (are they strangers?
friends? family? romantically involved in some way?). The social class of the figures
depicted is additionally hard to identify due to a lack of detail in the clothing, and the
inability to identify the space. While the viewer must still inquire further into Picasso’s
work to try to understand the nuance of the implied complex relationship and narrative,
viewers of Sher-Gil’s work are deprived of all of the usual cues that would be given by
most other artworks. The viewer is compelled to demystify the already unyielding
narrative of *Hill Men and Woman*.

The clothing in *Poor People on the Sea Shore* (fig. 26) similarly envelops the
figures. Though there is much more variation in the drapery, the human form is still
hidden and distorted (the male figure looks as though he does not have hands, and the
female figure is only defined as such by a partial view of her head and a glimpse of her
foot). Bodily forms are, however, more recognizable than in Sher-Gil’s work. The legs of
the man and child are easily recognizable and make anatomical sense, as do their arms. Like Sher-Gil’s work, Picasso uses very few colors—in fact it is completely blue except for the shawl covering the little boy, highlighting him as a key figure in the composition. Sher-Gil’s space proves to be more ambiguous than Picasso’s, as she depicts only a floor line. Picasso’s space is still relatively difficult to make sense of, however. Even though his space is indicated by a horizon line, there is no real rendering or indication of perspective; the figures simply exist on this foreground, with the world on a monotonous flat plane behind them. The waterline is only indicated by a few abstracted squiggly white lines suggesting foam. The location of the figures is hard to determine and hard to rationalize. Why these people have decided to engage with each other on a shore is unclear.

In *Hill Men and Woman* there is no indication of the subjects’ engagement with the world. None of their blank stares meet, and their hands are completely absent from this composition (serving to dehumanize the figures, and to alienate the viewer). Their close proximity indicates nothing but the restrictions of their world as they pushed closely together, forming a tight circle, with only slivers of space separating them. The feet of the figures are in fact the only rendered physical element that connects them all as a believable group. This is emphasized by the only architectural element in the composition—the floor line—that pushes sharply down, holding the feet in the warmest place, the brightly colored, glowing, yellow ground. If one divides these spaces according to the architectural elements in the background, the distinguishing features are notably

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69 The viewer might wonder what exactly the figures are doing with their hands, a fear that would be emphasized by the ambiguous forearm of the central figure, leading the viewer to wonder what the central figure is doing with his hand which is not only obscured by the central figure’s clothing, but almost intentionally by the body of the figure on the right. A reflection of attempts to understand the narrative as a whole, this promising lead is merely a dead end.
grouped spatially. For *Hill Men and Woman*, the faces are placed in the upper register, and the feet are placed in the lower register (there are no hands to complicate this bisected composition with a third register). Though one might assume that the faces of the figures will provide the most evidence for the grouping of these figures because faces are usually the nexus of information in a painting with human subjects, and because 85% of the painting is devoted to this register, all of them point in different directions and bear no definable markers of an exterior narrative. The feet, however, relegated to the bottom 15% of the composition, point decidedly inward toward some shared purpose that the viewer cannot see or ascertain. Whereas their stares and psychologies might be distant and unrelated, their feet reify their relationship as intentional and suggest an intimacy that might be overlooked if the painting were read cursorily (this importance of feet is similar to Sher-Gil’s treatment and narrative importance of the element in *Young Girls*).

The setting in *Poor People at the Sea Shore* serves only to emphasize the most expressive elements of the painting—the faces, hands and feet. The background serves as an organizing element, as parallel bands or registers divide the subjects’ bodies for further analysis. The faces are relegated to the sky section. No gaze is met, and in fact there are no gazes, as the eyes have been completely obscured, suggesting withdrawal. Even the mouths of both adult figures are obscured; the woman’s shoulder and the man’s beard prevent the viewer from seeing this facial feature, which might have been essential elements of determining the narrative. In fact the mouth of the little boy extends below the skyline into the water section of the painting, which also contains the only hands in the composition, those of the little boy. These two elements are the most discernable expressions in the composition, yet their lack of context renders them relatively
meaningless. The boy gestures ambiguously, merely adding some life into the deadened narrative of the work. The proximity of the boy’s hand to the thigh of the man (father?) next to him is uncertain—playing on Picasso’s expressed interest in spatial relations, as discussed in terms of *Harlequin’s Family* (this theme is additionally played out in Sher-Gil’s work with the feet of *Young Girls* and the hands of the men in *Hill Men and Woman*). Finally, the feet all point inward, enclosed by the final register—the earth. As evinced in *Hill Men and Woman*, this can be interpreted as a means of connecting the figures by implying some indefinable but common goal. Though the faces and upper bodies all face away from each other, the feet create an enclosed space that suggests inclusion or a shared intent.

The framing edge of the *Hill Men and Woman* sharply hems in the figures, either running along the contours of their bodies/ garments, or only rationing out a sliver of space from their bodies to the edge. The framing edge therefore becomes the only exterior and identifiable element grouping the figures together. Although these figures do not seem to engage intellectually with one another, they do seem to be connected by their mutual detachment. They are all lost in their own thoughts, completely severed from their stark physical surroundings, and, in that, they find commonality. While the framing edge is important for Picasso’s work, it does not have nearly the same hemmed-in effect as Sher-Gil’s work does. For *Poor People on the Sea Shore*, the background and the movement of the male figure prove much more important for the narrative.

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71 Ibid.
72 Although the figures in Sher-Gil’s work are completely stationary, as noted above, only the woman and the child are completely stationary in Picasso’s work. The man seems to be both moving and stationary as he bends his leg with purpose, but does not have anywhere to go. This creates a similar “dead end” effect for a potential narrative that Sher-Gil produces in *Hill Men and Woman* with the indication of the forearms.
By the time Sher-Gil began her artistic career, Picasso had already gone through several stages of his own artistic development. Had Sher-Gil lived longer, she might have continued playing with concepts that interested Picasso in his later career. However, the work she did produce points to the tentative conclusion that Picasso’s work and influences factored into her artistic decisions. Her exploration of group dynamics, social situations and conventions, and the expectations of the viewer can be easily compared with that of Picasso. The plethora of group paintings that both artists produced suggests that these concepts interested them for a long period of time, and that one painting did not necessarily resolve these issues for them.

These elements serve only to frustrate the viewer as he tries to make sense of a narrative that cannot be understood based on the information allotted.
Figures: Chapter 2

Figure 17. *La Masquerade*, Lucien Simon, 1910

Figure 18. *Le Petit Dejeuner*, Lucien Simon
Figure 19. *Young Girls*, Amrita Sher-Gil, 1932
Figure 20. Harlequin’s Family, Pablo Picasso, 1905
Figure 21. *Still Life with a Plate of Cherries*, Paul Cézanne, 1887

Figure 22. *The Boy with Cherries*, Édouard Manet, 1858
Figure 23. *Street Singer*, Édouard Manet, 1862
Figure 24. *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, Édouard Manet, 1862-1963
Figure 25. *Hill Men and Woman*, Amrita Sher-Gil, 1935
Figure 26. *Poor People on the Sea Shore*, Pablo Picasso, 1903
Chapter 3

Envisioning Sacred Untruths

Red—evoking notions of passion, blood, heat, war, sumptuousness, love, and hate—does not just color the worlds presented in Gauguin’s *Vision After the Sermon* (fig. 27) and Sher-Gil’s *Haldi Grinder* (fig. 28); it defines these worlds. The depicted scenes, and the perceptions of the on-lookers, are literally grounded in red. In some way, being a viewer necessarily means becoming a believer: when these works act to draw the viewer into the narrative, the earth the viewer now walks on subverts his innate sense of norms abruptly and incomprehensibly. Thus, standing on the red earth means participating in the vision. Even if the viewer does not understand the scene before him, he *must* believe in it to actively engage with the content of the painting. If the one requirement for a viewer is to look at a painting with the desire to understand it, Sher-Gil and Gauguin play on this requirement, making a greater commitment for the viewer than he might have been prepared to accept. But how has the viewer been subsumed so perfectly into the narrative of these works without his realizing and with little to no attempt on his part?

The assumed level of ideological commitment necessary for viewing a work and the assumed independent and unaffected self-positioning of the viewer might be corrupted when passive viewing of these works becomes nearly impossible.73 Both

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73 The anonymity or invisibility of the viewer of film or theater is created by “the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation. Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world. Among other things, the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire on to the performer” (Laura Mulvey, “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema,” *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* [1997], 836). Fried argues that the late
Gauguin and Sher-Gil include the implied viewer in the narratives of their works, which are only completed with the viewer’s presence. Furthering the idea that the world of a painting only exists as long as one is looking at it, for these works the world is generated and the content completed by the viewer. *Vision* might have only focused on the main action—Jacob wrestling the angel. Instead the supposed central content of the work has been pushed off to the corner; detail and legibility have been subdued. More importance has been placed on the women and their implied hand in creating the vision. The foreground of *Vision After the Sermon* is made up almost entirely of the distinctive caps of the fervently religious Breton women—indeed these caps take up almost half of the composition. The formal and compositional importance of the women’s reactions proves to be as central as the vision itself. The viewer is placed in the crowd, seeing mainly the backs of heads and shoulders, having to peek around these women to get a good look at the scene in front of him. There is a place for him in this crowd. In this way, the viewer has become a part of the narrative. He must identify with these women in some way. Because their vantage point has become the viewer’s vantage point, their sight has become his sight, their faith, his faith. As a member of the crowd, the hats, symbolic of the religious piety and naïveté of the group, become the main signifiers of the perspective he must now adopt. The prized naïveté of these women can be at once understood and appropriated by the viewer in the shared vision, while he can simultaneously deconstruct and analyze it from an outsider’s perspective (a position that may be similar to Gauguin’s own self-positioning as an outsider with a unique insight into this culture). The viewer

19th and early 20th century viewer of art was very affected by similar issues as the viewer of theater as the absorptive qualities of both seemed to align. This would suggest similar reactions and feelings of the viewer as a viewer (including feelings of anonymity etc.). Whereas the darkness of the theater and the invisibility within the crowd offers anonymity in the theater, the inanimity of the object and the potential for solitary viewing would offer up another kind of anonymity.
can participate in the vision, but must maintain a level self-reflexively as watching the other members of the group is so important to the composition. He becomes at once an insider and an outsider, accepted and rejected, accepting and rejecting. “Objective” viewership is made nearly impossible. While the viewer may have thought he could view works from an objective position when he walked up to *Vision After the Sermon*, if he questions his own perspective, he would nullify the possibility of evaluating himself or the painting (if his rationality and objective perspective are in question, he does not have the requisite rational perspective to judge anyone or anything).

*Haldi Grinder* also draws preconceived notions of viewership, ownership, objectification and participation between the viewer and the art object into question. Instead of identifying with the group, as the viewer would in *Vision After the Sermon*, however, the viewer is alone, peaking onto the scene from behind a tree. Indeed the tree evokes the trappings of voyeuristic activity, while at the same time recalling the tree element from *Vision After the Sermon*. In both works the tree serves as a (semi-permeable) barrier between reality and unreality. Many scholars have argued that the tree in Gauguin’s work separates these worlds—the angel and Jacob wrestling to the right of the tree, and the Breton women, the priest, and the cow, to the left of it. However, it seems that Gauguin uses this barrier to suggest that the worlds may not be so separate after all. The red ground extends past the barrier of the tree, into the space of the women and the viewer. Furthermore, a cow, symbolizing the common and the everyday realities of these women, walks on the same ground as that on which Jacob and the angel wrestle. Finally, although there is a suggestion that the tree continues to the right to include the last Breton woman and the priest with the rest of the group, it seems more likely that they
stand to the right side of the tree with the angel and Jacob. The suggestion here is that the barriers between reality and non-reality are not as clean as one might have hoped—a notion that has already been broached with the sublimation of the viewer into the content of the work. Sher-Gil’s tree, however, serves two purposes. Similar to Gauguin’s, the red ground that might have been contained by the barrier of the tree, emerges from the right branch into the space of the viewer, once again suggesting that reality and unreality are hard to delineate. It also serves the function of the Breton women in Gauguin’s work for drawing the viewer into the narrative of the work. This scene might have been depicted with no tree at all, which only obscures the main action of the scene. The positioning of the tree, taking up almost half of the content of the composition, extending from below the bottom edge of the composition to above the top barrier of the composition and terminating with a V-shaped opening where the viewer might stand, would suggest that the viewer in the narrative of this work stands in or just behind a tree in hiding as he looks at these figures. This places much more of the responsibility for the vision on the viewer. In this case the viewer is either seeing a mysticism that is not actually present, or, like Gauguin’s work, has been subsumed into a world where the supernatural is the reality. Whereas in Gauguin’s work the viewer may have been able to pawn off some of the responsibility for the vision on the staunchly religious people surrounding him, in this work, he looks on alone. This means that the viewer must be “seeing things” in order for him to participate in the content of this work. Here, once again, if the viewer engages with the work, his objectivity is called into question and his ability to rationally judge himself, the painting, and the world around him. The additional secretive aspect to this vantage point makes the composition a less comfortable space for the viewer to inhabit.
While he could view Gauguin’s work openly in a crowd, he has been relegated to hiding secretly in a tree without his consent. Now the viewer has been implicated in some subversive action with no way to remove himself other than to walk away from the painting. The next logical question for the viewer to ask is—“why am I hiding?”

Whereas in Gauguin’s work, the supernatural elements can be clearly identified by the angel’s wings, Sher-Gil’s work does not make this identification as easy. These women are simply grinding a spice, Turmeric (or Haldi). However the intensification of the color, the secretive nature of the viewer’s looking, the notable absence of faces imbues this work with an unavoidable supernatural feeling. Indeed the only face that is visible is that of the central figure. This figure has “the upper hand” on the grinder, and holds the ground product in her hand. She seems to be the leader of the group and her face has been reduced to a single, glowing yellow slit in place of her eye, and a red bindi, and the very edge of a red sindoor. The bindi, a small dot sometimes comprising vermilion or kumkum (a product created from turmeric) placed on the center of the forehead just above the eyes, can have many connotations. In combination with the red sindoor, red coloring of the hair part, it usually signifies a woman who is married, a practice which may have roots in early traditional blood sacrifices made to the gods. Additionally, “in the Hindu context, the bindi signifies the third eye… correlated with intuition… and psychic abilities, such as the ability to see the future.”74 The psychic or mystical quality most embodied by this central figure is emphasized by the red branch that pops up right above her head, serving as a kind of indicator. This is the only element of the foliage or background that is not green, and since red is the complementary color

of green it particularly stands out and identifies with the scene on the ground which, as discussed, is defined by red. This extra-body element shows a supernatural quality that is inextricably linked with nature, a theme emphasized by the central action in the work—the grinding of turmeric.

Themes of interiority and exteriority (acceptance and alienation, inclusion and exclusion) seem to be extremely valuable when considering *Vision After the Sermon* and *Haldi Grinder*. Gauguin expressed his desire to have a mystical experience in *Noa Noa*. Towards the end of the narrative he suggests that he succeeds in having such an experience, while simultaneously remaining critical of it. This belief that there is something essential about humanity that had been lost to formal education and industrialization (that was perhaps still accessible to “primitive” cultures) would have been prevalent in Sher-Gil’s context as well. *Vision After the Sermon*, as discussed above, allows the viewer a certain level of identification with the Bretons while simultaneously allowing a critical perspective. This same sort of experience is conveyed to the viewer of *Haldi Grinder* in multiple ways. The scene can be read as a group of women grinding a spice. However, the grinder seems to exude its own light source, illuminating the circle and its peripheries. The faces of the women have been obfuscated or, in the case of the central figure, reduced to a shadow. The strange proportions of these figures might be missed or could be seen as mere distortion resulting from the interrupting form of the tree. However, the way the legs of the two central figures are elongated to enclose and protect the grinder, and to create an intersection of the three women’s feet at the base of the grinder suggests an access that these figures have to some kind of knowledge that the viewer might not have access to. Sher-Gil additionally alienates the little girl’s arm from
her own body by separating it with the large tree trunk, reducing its form to geometric shapes, not suggesting shadow or the three-dimensionality of the form, and by painting the arm with a similar color and hue to the ground. Indeed the branch that she holds, with its clear forms and stark yellow-green color, is significantly easier to differentiate from the ground than her arm proves to be. This alienation suggests a kind of dual-narrative. Though the girl’s engagement in the central activities is suggested by the positioning of her main body, it is her arm, firmly grasping the branch that suggests the level and intensity of her engagement. The alienation of body parts was a theme Picasso often played with. Works like Harlequin’s Family with an Ape (fig. 29), in which the mother’s arm could so easily be seen as the ape’s is a prime example of this. Picasso makes this confusion a possibility by blending the ape’s right arm into his body, pairing the positioning and proximity of his right foot to his right hand so that they might seen to be continuations of one another. The ape’s shoulder is positioned right next to the elbow of the mother with little to no division between the two forms. Most importantly, the black shawl of the woman obscures her arm: it breaks the arm into two seemingly unrelated segments, and proves closer to the color of the ape’s fur so that the continuation of his arm through this space is not visually jarring, but rather visually suggestive. Finally the skin of the woman’s forearm and hand are darker than the rest of her skin (most notably her shoulder and chest), and proves almost tonally identical to the end of the ape’s mouth and nose and the highlights on his cheek and left hand. These potential dual readings that result from alienated body parts suggest an interior narrative that might be inaccessible or hard to ascertain for the viewer, yet one that has the potential to be open to him. Both Vision After the Sermon and Haldi Grinder present dynamics of initiation. While the
viewer stands in the crowd with the Bretons in Vision After the Sermon, he remains critical of them. Though he is privy to the vision, he is still viewing it as a non-reality. Haldi Grinder suggests a knowledge that the women have access to that the viewer might not. The young girl on the periphery, clearly learning the trade suggests an initiation process that the viewer might be engaging in or not.

Perhaps what proves most important to Vision After the Sermon and Haldi Grinder is the dynamic relationship between the insider and outsider position. Sher-Gil and Gauguin experienced these positions personally, and explored them extensively in their work. Sher-Gil employs ambiguity and potential duality of narrative to suggest these themes to the viewer. Gauguin makes the viewer participate in the vision as he makes the main content of the work unquestioningly supernatural, yet it is always with a critical eye and a potential differentiation between himself and the Bretons. What is most important is the feeling induced by existing in the liminal space of these dual-narratives. These works suggest that reality and non-reality might not be as defined as one might have assumed, and that this division seems to be completely dependent on the perspective of the viewer. The desire to engage with a primitive truth was prevalent during modernism; do these works offer entry into these truths, or merely replicate the situation of the modern viewer?
Figure 27. *Vision After the Sermon*, Paul Gauguin, 1888
Figure 28. *Haldi Grinder*, Amrita Sher-Gil, 1930
Figure 29. *Harlequin’s Family with an Ape*, Pablo Picasso, 1905
Chapter 4

Reflecting the Gaze

_Olympia_, Manet’s 1863 seminal work, shifted the experience of viewing an artwork to an examination one’s own position as a viewer. The fact that modernists used the nude as a tool to explore new styles, techniques, themes, etc. aligns with Melville’s assertion that modernism both recalled and rejected historical precedent. Sher-Gil’s _Torso_ (1932) acknowledges and reflects the centrality of the female nude in art; however, it also suggests the lack of progress since 1863 to reduce the exploitation of the nude, implicating the supposedly forward-looking Fathers of Modernism. While _Olympia_ does stare aggressively at the viewer, even _her_ body is still beautifully displayed for his visual pleasure. This is not to say that Sher-Gil does not fall into the same trap; she does, however, make it difficult for the viewer to simplify her work or her body as mere objects of sexual pleasure. Sher-Gil emphasizes nudity in _Torso_, making what had become invisible visible, and subverts expectations about what nudity can mean and whom it is for. Sher-Gil evokes works like Matisse’s 1901 _Carmelina_ and 1903 _La Coiffure_ thematically, but with a critical eye. Sher-Gil’s _Torso_ and Matisse’s _La Coiffure_ are both works of a specific genre, presenting strong visual and compositional similarities. Though this comparison may seem to be valuable at first blush, it is limited ideologically and formally. Hopefully by the end of this chapter it will become apparent that although Sher-Gil’s work may look very similar to _La Coiffure, Carmelina_ best illuminates the complications that _Torso_ represents to the history of the female nude.
Both *Torso* and *La Coiffure* feature nude women with fully exposed backs looking toward framed objects. *La Coiffure* (fig. 30) presents a nude woman with her arms raised up to present her body most advantageously; the arms do not obfuscate her form, and they cannot protect her body physically or formally. The chair on which the woman sits has been turned 90 degrees so that its back does not obscure hers. Her legs are wrapped in a fluffy white blanket, which, nevertheless reveals and frames the top of her buttocks and hips (revealing more skin where the light shines brightest). The space in which the woman exists is hard to determine. A yellow vase holding red flowers sits in front of her on a table covered with a white cloth. A gold-framed object also sits on this table; this might represent a painting, or, more likely, a mirror. The table seems to be situated in a niche; however closer investigation of this space reveals some confusion of perspective. It seems as though the viewer is looking at the niche from off-center and to the left; however the right wall of the niche pushes out way more than it should. The floor-line in the niche also pushes too severely upward. The right portion of the main wall pushes back more than it should; as it is, the main wall feels like it curves away from the woman, as though this were an image taken with a fish-eye camera lens. Additionally, although the viewer sees the woman’s back straight on, and must therefore be viewing her from a relatively low vantage point, the tabletop is tilted down, suggesting the viewer is looking down at it. On the periphery of the painting, compositional elements become harder to define. In the left bottom corner of the work an unidentifiable brown cylindrical object extends into the space, even casting a shadow. On the right side of the painting, what looks like a reed floor mat seems to push up off the floor as it extends past the framing edge into darkness. The woman is in the process of “dressing” while not actually
progressing in her attempt to conceal her body. In fact, as she pulls her hair up to fix it into place, her body is further exposed. Interestingly, a usual signifier of female modesty—closely drawn hair—has been subverted in this context, now serving as a mode for greater exposure. The title of the work, “La Coiffure,” even suggests that the woman’s hair will be of primary importance to the narrative. Indeed this is where all of the action is occurring—the woman’s hands are fixing her bun as she looks into the mirror to double check her work. However, this supposedly central narrative element seems only to serve a facilitating function as it becomes clear that the main content of the work is the visual display of the nude woman’s body.

_Torso_ (fig. 31) depicts a seated figure facing away from the viewer; just in front and to the left of her sits a painting of a nude woman. Sher-Gil refers to _Torso_ in a letter as “my nude,” which is surprising due to the customary use of professional models for artworks at this time. The figure’s back takes up the majority of the composition. Its modeling is particularly intense, resulting in a visual description that might be considered slightly exaggerated. The figure’s left arm terminates with her hand splayed behind her left buttocks. A bracelet delineates and simultaneously obscures a clear division between her arm and her hand. Her upper right arm rests at her side, while her right forearm and hand extend in front of her body, hidden from view. Her hair has been parted down the middle and presumably extends to rest on her chest, leaving her back completely

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75 Vivan Sunduram tentatively claims in *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Portrait in Letters and Writings* that this comment is in reference to _Nude Self-Portrait with Palette_ (fig. 32); however, Sher-Gil is talking about a series of paintings she sent to a competition. _Nude Self-Portrait with Palette_ is a sketch (or at least was at the time of the letter), and would not have been sent to a painting competition with five other completed, full-size oil paintings. As this is the only nude that Sher-Gil completed in 1932 in which the figure is facing away, and all of the other nudes involve models that are clearly not her because their faces are visible, it can safely be concluded that _Torso_ is the work she is referring to. Moreover, I will argue that _Nude Self-Portrait with Palette_ may have been a first attempt to get at themes Sher-Gil ends up addressing to full effect in _Torso_; in fact I argue that she incorporates a modified version of this sketch into the composition _Torso_.

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available for view. The figure’s head is turned to the left, looking directly at the only other discernibly relevant element in the work—the other female nude. The painting within the painting exhibits a Caucasian woman (hereafter referred to as “frontal nude”) with ginger hair, pink skin, rosy cheeks, and red nipples, who is displayed in full frontal nudity. The frontal nude is positioned in a passive pose in an ambiguous space, which serves as an ideal setting for the full display of her body. Both of the spaces (that of the frontal nude and that of Sher-Gil) are ambiguous and hard to define. The frontal nude, denied a discernable context, seems to be floating, lying flat on her back seen from an aerial perspective, leaning against something, or, if rotated 90 degrees counterclockwise, lying on a couch or bed. Most likely, however, the figure’s positioning indicates that this painting is a modified version of Sher-Gil’s 1932 *Nude Self-Portrait with Palette*, hereafter referred to as *Palette* (fig. 32). The modern-looking frame in which the frontal nude is confined, and the navy blue blanket on which Sher-Gil sits (the same navy blue of the frontal nude’s environs) prove to be the only discernable elements defining Sher-Gil’s space. The frame lines reinforce the direction of her gaze, and the dark section of the wall to her right becomes almost indistinguishable from the shadows of the cloth on which she sits.

Although both *Torso* and *La Coiffure* present a view of a woman’s back as the woman looks at a framed object in front of her, the difference in posture and positioning of these figures indicates a dissimilarity in tone and intended meaning of the paintings. Whereas the woman in *La Coiffure* sits erect and exposed with her arms raised, Sher-Gil sits slightly hunched over with her arms twisting around her form. The positioning of Sher-Gil’s arms not only suggests her grounding in the three-dimensional space, but also

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76 The reasons and implications for this suggestion will be detailed below.
formally and physically protects her body. Indeed it seems important that the woman in
La Coiffure could be metaphorically aligned with the bottle of flowers on her vanity,
serving only as beautiful, meaningless, purposeless decoration; the presumed straight
edge of the tablecloth becomes especially jagged at the moment it comes closest to the
fluffy blanket wrapped around the woman’s hips. The distinction in texture of these two
completely different fabrics is blurred in this moment, so that the presentation of the
woman can be aligned with the presentation of the vase.77 Sher-Gil’s context never
serves to simplify her psychology or her artistic purpose, but to electrify them.78

The narrative of La Coiffure is not complicated. The woman looks at herself in a
mirror while the viewer looks at her from behind. The viewer, the painter and the looker
within the reality of the work have all been seamlessly conflated (the fourth wall is
maintained).79 The viewer may feel a slight voyeuristic thrill at his sudden introduction
into this intimate setting, but there does not seem to be a negative connotation attached
with this identification. The physical position of the looker is out in the open as he views
the woman, who must know of his presence due to his proximity, and the location and
angle of the mirror. The narrative is intimate and open and therefore trusting, or at least
normative and unquestioned. The viewer does not necessarily have to address why he has

77 This is a theme that Matisse was interested in throughout his lifetime. In The Red Studio (fig. 33) for
instance, Matisse conflates woman, object, and two-dimensional surface via the medium of the nasturtium
flowers, the flowers in the painted background of the nude on the left, and the floral pattern on the bowl
closest to the viewer on the table. In each of these mini-compositions a woman is being encased or
encircled by flowers. It seems as though Matisse is conflating these flowers and nude women, claiming that
they serve the same purpose on the table or in the painting—as decoration. “The reclining nude, an
embodiment of sensual pleasure, is easily linked with the ivy which in classical mythology is an attribute of
Bacchus and an emblem of intoxication… in the Red Studio… it is a similar plant that literally embraces
his statuette of a nude… her arms behind her head…Thus the Red Studio… can be seen as a [statement] in
terms of small, decorative objects of the vision of a Golden Age… in monumental, figurative terms”
(Theodore Reff, "Matisse: Meditations on a Statuette and Goldfish," Arts Magazine 51 no. 3 [1976]: 114).
78 This point will be developed further later in the chapter.
79 Consider the anonymity of the viewer that is maintained even as he identifies with the “protagonist” as
discussed by Mulvey, quoted in Chapter 3.
been allowed to adopt this position, but has the ability to merely slide into it, with the choice to exit it freely at his leisure. The shallow nature of the content allows for a shallow engagement with the work. The perspective adopted when viewing *La Coiffure* seems almost necessarily sexually motivated, as no other plausible reasons for the availability of this painting or this view are apparent. The woman’s own self-directed looking seems to be just as shallow as the viewer/painter/lover’s perspective as she looks at herself in a mirror to make sure her hair is presentable. The uncomplicated, easily consumable, shallow qualities of *La Coiffure* cannot be applied to *Torso*.

Sher-Gil does not make viewership so easy in *Torso*. In this work, she identifies as painter, painted, model, nude woman, and viewer, maintaining control over almost every aspect of the painting. By creating this work, Sher-Gil injects agency into the traditional female roles of model and nude woman, while appropriating the traditionally male roles of painter and viewer. She has control over her pose, her body, and how her body is painted. Even while the viewer consumes this nude image, Sher-Gil counts herself as at least his equal by presenting herself as a viewer of female nudes within the content of the work—indeed this seems to be the main content. If the frontal nude is considered to be a reworking of *Palette*, Sher-Gil would be aligning herself even more closely with the viewer of *Torso* as one who is looking at her naked body.

Sher-Gil takes steps to control the viewer’s experience of *Torso*, further subverting expectations about the agency a female nude can have. While a quick glance at the work might suggest an easily and anonymously consumable image (one that might easily be equated to *La Coiffure*, for example), *Torso* may suggest a space that excludes or transforms the viewer. If one imagines the hypothetical studio space in which Sher-Gil
worked, one is tempted to imagine two mirrors in place—one where the frontal nude painting is positioned, and where Sher-Gil looks, and the other where the viewer would be standing if he were in the room with her. Since the mirror blocks the viewer from theoretically existing in this space, he must become the mirror or be denied existence in the space—viewing the painting merely as fiction, without being able to indulge in the implied reality of Sher-Gil, nude in her studio space. As opposed to La Coiffure, where the viewer may comfortably identify with the painter and the assumed lover in the reality of the painting, in Torso he must either become a non-participant in the viewing process or he must identify as the mirror, aiding Sher-Gil in viewing herself. Drawn out, this metaphor suggests that Sher-Gil is able to use the viewer to exercise her own vanity. She has an excuse to paint her naked body under the pretense of making it for an external viewer when she is in fact making it in order to look at herself (via the mirror, the frontal nude [as a form of Palette], or Torso) for her own pleasure. The viewer’s (dis)pleasure in viewing this work becomes a tool for Sher-Gil’s own enjoyment, giving her agency and a kind of power over the viewer; she is able to manipulate him whether he is passive or active while viewing her work. This metaphor would be emphasized further if one sees the frontal nude as a modified version of Palette. The mirror and the frontal nude would then serve the same function in showing Sher-Gil a version of her own nude form. The woman in La Coiffure has no power over how her body is depicted, or how the viewer sees her. Whereas the viewer might be made uncomfortable by the power shift in his viewing of Torso, his comfort is never questioned in his observation of La Coiffure. A viewer of Torso might only see a female nude, a potentiality that Sher-Gil addresses by conflating her mirror image with the insipid and uncomplicated frontal nude, evoking
images like *La Coiffure*. However, if one looks past the obvious nudity in the work, the complexities of the narrative, the play between two-dimensional and three-dimensional space, and the interacting qualities that both reveal and withhold, make a shallow reading of the work or of the woman depicted nearly impossible.

While the painting seems to rely only on the beauty of Sher-Gil’s back, *Torso* becomes more complex as one studies the positioning of her body and how it defines the space. The back serves as a central grounding pillar as her left arm twists behind her and her right arm twists in front of her. Whereas the body of the frontal nude seems to exist in a very shallow, flattened space, Sher-Gil’s body activates the three-dimensional space that it defines. While the flat and indeterminate space of the frontal nude seems to re-emphasize the physical and emotional shallowness of her rendering, Sher-Gil’s body creates the space, lending definition to what would be indefinite without her presence. Indeed the shallowness of the frontal nude might be compared with that of *La Coiffure*. As previously discussed, the space in *La Coiffure* suggests a fish-eye view as every surface is pushed out towards the viewer, allowing for optimal display of the nude back. It is almost as though this world is pushing the woman towards the surface of the painting and the viewer. The shallowness of her implied persona (suggested by her vanity and the absence of her face) and of her form in space might align *La Coiffure* more closely with the frontal nude than with *Torso*. Sher-Gil’s body works as a positive, active force in *Torso* as her legs and right forearm implicitly push forward, unseen, while her left arm fills the space between the viewer and her back, coming to the very bottom edge of the painting. Sher-Gil’s gaze energizes the space in front of her, drawing attention to the area

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80 Imagine *Torso* without Sher-Gil’s body. The space would not be convincing without her form. Therefore her form does not just exist in the space, but creates it. This effect is emphasized further with the charged space between Sher-Gil and the frontal nude, discussed below.
that the viewer does not have access to. Whereas the women in the frontal nude and *La Coiffure* are engaged in totally visible inactivity, Sher-Gil is doing something, and one is left wondering what that something might be. One must wonder what she is doing with her right hand in this hidden bubble of space. If one reads this as a painting of Sher-Gil in her studio space, her right hand would be painting. However, with the nude replacing the mirror, what is she likely to be doing while looking at a female nude alone and naked? There have seldom been spaces for women to look at other women. Indeed it was only during Sher-Gil’s lifetime that female artists were allowed to work with completely nude models of either sex as part of their artistic training. Her gaze may be read as “sexually charged,” along with the possibility that she looks on as a critical artist, or that she is using this opportunity to align herself with the power of the male viewer. The potential sexual content of this looking also emphasizes the self-indulgent quality of *Torso* if we imagine the frontal nude as a modified *Palette*. The suggestive content of *Torso* adds to the exclusionary tone of the painting, while the believability and beauty of her form keeps the viewer looking.

The frontal nude seems to be Sher-Gil’s assertion of the failures of a stereotypical female nude (such as *La Coiffure*). The frontal nude is almost pushed up against the surface of the painting as if to show as much of her as possible. There is very little suggestion that her figure exists in a space, especially considering the indeterminate, almost negative, quality of the blue-black background. The slightly darker patch of skin

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82 This type of power is discussed at length by Mulvey, who suggests that, "as the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 838). The reason for this imbalance of power and sexualization of women for Mulvey is that, "...woman as representation signifies castration, inducing voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat" (843).
on the left side of her body is so shallow and underemphasized in relation to Sher-Gil’s body in *Torso*. The rendering of Sher-Gil’s body in *Torso* communicates an abundance of information while showing comparatively little of her body. Sher-Gil’s body proves more believable in a three-dimensional space in its positioning and its rendering. One may argue that her body is even over-rendered as the reflected light on the underside of her right arm glows more than it might; the effect of this over-rendering allows for a kind of hyper-reality—her form remains convincing, which is re-emphasized by these moments rather than nullified. Whereas the arms and legs of the frontal nude languidly exist around her in the unexciting negative space that reflects back her own nonplussed body language, Sher-Gil is able to charge her space by depicting the twisting of her own form within it, and by suggesting it rather than fully showing it. The overlapping of Sher-Gil’s form and that of the frontal nude (the frontal nude’s left leg is mostly obscured by Sher-Gil’s left arm) suggest a play between two-dimensional and three-dimensional space. Overlapping forms on a two-dimensional surface suggests three-dimensional space, straddling the line between the visual perception and the reality of space. When used to draw attention to a relationship between a depicted three-dimensional form (like Sher-Gil’s torso) and a depicted two-dimensional representation (like the frontal nude) this type of discussion is instigated. This overlapping and touching also suggest thematically relational and spatially charged forms. In certain cases artists overlap forms in order to suggest a physical manifestation of an ideological connection between or among forms. If emphasized correctly, this can create a charged space in the composition that draws the attention of the viewer, and therefore reinforces the ideological connection. The overlapping of Sher-Gil’s elbow and the knee of the frontal nude seems to be just such an
occasion. The centrality of the frontal nude to the composition, Sher-Gil’s potential identification with the nude, the possibility of sexual tension produced by the nude, etc. are themes suggested and reinforced by this small but impactful compositional note.

Therefore, while the frontal nude, like La Coiffure, serves as a point of departure, it also becomes a kind of reflection. Whenever an “Other” is created to contrast an “Original,” it also becomes an intrinsic part of the Original, as the overlapping element, the similarly ambiguous backgrounds, and the potential conflation between the frontal nude and Palette would suggest about Torso and the frontal nude.

It is important to note that the framed object in La Coiffure is relatively ambiguous. From one perspective it can be read as a mirror into which the woman looks. In this case, her entire body is exposed, with her back facing the viewer, and her front exposed in the mirror. Interestingly, however, the reflection has been obscured just enough to make the viewer question the object as a mirror. This keeps the focus of the work on the back of the woman as opposed to the reflection. It also obscures the face of the woman, which, as noted above, maintains the psychologically shallow nature of the narrative. The ambiguity of the reflection allows for the possibility that the object might just as easily be read as a painting. The uncertain angle of the table, and the strange architecture of the space might support this analysis. Sher-Gil additionally played with this concept in Torso as previously discussed. While Sher-Gil’s conflation allows her to comment on the social function of the female nude, female sexuality, the relationship of the viewer to the painting, as well as the complexities of two-dimensional form, La Coiffure seems only to address the lattermost issue. The potential conflation of mirrors

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83 If the narrative of Torso were to be read as Sher-Gil’s sexual self-gratification, it might be interesting to note that while her right arm is engaged in sexual activity, her left arm is “touching” the frontal nude.
and paintings is a theme that Matisse is known to play with in his works. He does so to greater effect with a work like *Carmelina*.

Although *La Coiffure* may have initially seemed like an obvious comparison for *Torso*, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that *La Coiffure* is too simplistic to offer an interesting counterpoint to *Torso*. While the woman in *La Coiffure* is engaged in a mindless, cosmetic, and “feminine activity,” Sher-Gil may be painting and/or looking at a female nude (with potential sexual pleasure)—traditionally masculine, distinctly active enterprises. While in *La Coiffure* the viewer’s perspective takes precedent (indeed Matisse oftentimes pushes the most advantageous aspects of a scene towards the viewer, enhancing the reality), the most intriguing space in *Torso* is precisely that space which is inaccessible to the viewer. Sher-Gil’s criticism of Matisse’s work has a harder edge for works like *La Coiffure* as opposed to rich-concept works like *Carmelina*. The stance that Sher-Gil takes in *Torso* may have to do with her dissatisfaction with the progression of the female nude since the beginning of modernism. The revealing, unprotected, and easily consumable qualities of *La Coiffure* are all elements which Sher-Gil seems to have intentionally complicated and consciously subverted. In terms of content, *La Coiffure* does not push the envelope for women or the societal expectations for an image of a female nude. In this case, Sher-Gil’s intervention with *Torso* brings into focus the shortcomings of modernism.

Sher-Gil’s *Torso* might be best understood when examined in light of Matisse’s *Carmelina* (fig. 34). *Carmelina* presents a frontally nude woman seated on a draped table. A swath of white fabric covers her left upper thigh and her genitalia. She sits erect, staring straight at the viewer with her hair tied in a blue bow on her left shoulder. The
table on which she sits is covered with a rich orange fabric and also sports a clear glass bottle. This leads one’s gaze to the blue teapot, which stands on a white-draped table in the middle of the room, eventually leading one’s gaze to a mirror which sits on a ledge on the back wall. The mirror displays a partial view of Carmelina’s back and another barely discernable figure in profile, with a red shirt, that looks at Carmelina. This is widely identified as Matisse painting this work. As no one else is depicted in the space revealed by the mirror, the viewer could either view the painting from Matisse’s perspective or potentially accept that he cannot exist in the reality of this work. A line of architecture cuts through the reflected space and continues up the wall via the shadow behind the mirror. This might indicate and emphasize the location where the viewer might have stood in the reflected space that remains markedly absent. The use of a shadow (a void, a negative space) to carry the emphasis of this absence into Carmelina’s space seems particularly important. The fact that the other delineating line of the shadow serves almost as an axis point for Carmelina, grounding her in this reality, while the other delineating line marks the viewer’s absence from this reality, seems apropos.

The importance of the gaze directed at Carmelina and the notable absence of the viewer, or his shifted viewpoint seem important when considering Torso. Perhaps the most appropriate place to begin the discussion of the gaze is by inspecting where Sher-Gil’s eye is cast—the frontal nude. Upon close inspection of the nude painting within Torso, it becomes clear that this is the kind of painting Sher-Gil is criticizing and differentiating Torso from. This nude woman is completely displayed for the viewer’s pleasure. Her breasts and genitals are fully exposed. Her arms languidly lie away from her body so as not to obscure it. Her legs are splayed, allowing for easy visual and
metaphorical access to her genitals. Her gaze points down and away from the viewer submissively. Though her positioning is hard to define, it is identifiable as inactive. She cannot be standing because the positioning of her legs would make this impossible. One might think she was running or in motion, but once again her legs are not convincingly positioned to support her body. One might think she was leaning against something in an upright position, but the lack of tenseness in her limbs or her abdomen would make this unlikely. She could be lying flat on a bed, painted from an aerial perspective, but this would be highly irregular. The only way she exists believably in the space (other than the unlikely scenario of her floating in it) would be if the composition were rotated 90 degrees counterclockwise. From this angle, one might believe her to be lying on a couch or a bed with a cushion. The frontal nude in Torso is not engaging in any activity, and could not do so without the viewer’s knowledge because she is so overexposed; the lighting of the work adds to this effect as it seems her entire body is illuminated with only a small portion of the body slightly darkened to suggest a flimsy three-dimensionality. Sher-Gil on the other hand realistically exists in space, defines the equally ambiguous surrounding space, activates it with her gaze and her body positioning, sits in an upright and active pose, exposes relatively little of her body while its physical presence is overly real, and excludes the viewer from the narrative of the work. In addition, while Sher-Gil does not make eye contact with the viewer either, her gaze does not prove submissive but active; she herself is looking at a female nude. Whereas women like Olympia assert their active presences by addressing the male viewer, in some ways reattributing the power to him, Sher-Gil does so while excluding him, diminishing his power.
One might make the suggestion that the frontal nude is a reworking of *Nude Self-Portrait with Palette*\(^{84}\) because the position of the frontal nude is so peculiar, so hard to rationalize and so different from any canonical poses of female nudes. Note that the shape and positioning of Sher-Gil’s left leg in *Palette* is almost identical to the right leg of the frontal nude. Additionally, the positioning of Sher-Gil’s left arm and right upper arm in *Palette* can be directly aligned to that of the frontal nude. If *Torso* is read as a depiction of Sher-Gil’s studio, it would make sense to see her other paintings in the space and suggest a context for *Torso* in Sher-Gil’s greater body of work.

The elements of Sher-Gil’s space have been limited to the bare essentials. One element is the female nude, which, as discussed, serves as an important narrative element. One may assert that since this nude has presumably been added in to obscure the mirror Sher-Gil used to paint this work, that it reflects an understanding on Sher-Gil’s part that *Torso* might be seen as she sees this frontal nude. This reading would be made all the more intense if the frontal nude is seen as a version of *Palette*. Since *Palette* (whereabouts unknown) either never became a full painting, or was given away by Sher-Gil, it may have been a draft of sorts for *Torso* (indeed *Palette* was created in the same year). While both paintings show a nude Sher-Gil performing the act of painting, *Torso* makes it much harder for the viewer to sexualize her. *Torso* also involves submission or frustration on the part of the viewer that *Palette* does not elicit. *Torso* also brings the self-indulgent theme into play on many more levels than *Palette* does. So perhaps Sher-Gil saw *Palette* as a potential failure in how it would be perceived (in the way that frontal nude fails), and decided to engage with it further in the complicated context of *Torso*. No matter what Sher-Gil is attempting to convey with *Torso*, it is still a female nude, and can

\(^{84}\) Hereafter referred to as *Palette*. 
therefore be objectified, sexualized, etc.; it might be taken for the available and submissive frontal nude that she studies. The mirroring of Sher-Gil’s and the frontal nude’s elbow positioning, pointing toward the left edge of the painting, suggests a kind of symmetry between the two, as does the inclusion of Sher-Gil’s “legs,” which recall those of the frontal nude. This symmetry points to the inevitable failing message of Torso as it remains a nude, but also suggests that the edge of the Torso composition (the edge of the canvas) might have terminated at Sher-Gil’s elbow, excluding the frontal nude from the work. Instead the edge of Torso terminates with the frontal nude’s elbow, and the inclusion of the frontal nude with all of its implications.

The changes that Sher-Gil makes to Palette signify and emphasize its intended meaning in the context of Torso. Her reshaping of this image emphasizes her abilities as an artist to shape and mold reality, reiterated by the fact that this painting was originally an image of her engaging in the act of painting. She has taken every element of agency from that she had in Palette out of the image of the frontal nude. Whereas her right leg in Palette is a central pillar in the work, suggesting her significant presence and her active, upright, standing pose, the frontal nude’s right leg has been bent, her body neutralized. In this way Sher-Gil made both of the frontal nude’s legs inactive, while only one is relaxed in the contrapposto pose in Palette. With this modification, one cannot identify the frontal nude as standing, or really discern how she exists in the space; it can only be deduced she does not dominate or determine the space. The context of Palette has been removed, leaving the frontal nude in an ambiguous space, and making her nudity the only discernable content. The palette, canvas and implied brush in Palette have been removed.

85 Emphasizing the fact that every painting she creates is rooted in the act of her painting it (her paintings cannot be isolated from her).
86 In fact she has been pushed out of the space to the surface of the painting, as discussed above.
These symbols of agency and potential power have been replaced by nothing. The frontal nude is performing no discernable actions, nor does she seem to have the potential to do so. With the Palette gone, her right arm lies limply at her side. With the brush gone, her left arm lies, purposeless, at her other side. Finally, if one is to think of the frontal nude as a reworking of another self-portrait, one must note the fact that Sher-Gil has appropriated another racial identity that is not her own, playing with themes explored in *Self-Portrait as Tahitian*. Once again she suggests the ambiguity and malleability of her own racial and cultural identity.

The frame of the frontal nude, the only discernable architectural element in the space, extends from Sher-Gil’s head past the left edge of the canvas. This places emphasis on the position of Sher-Gil’s head and her gaze, and it also compresses it, charging the space further. This compression is created by the increasingly reduced rectangular spaces produced by the wall above the frame, wooden frame itself, the white surface on which the painting is mounted, and the blue rectangle defined by the frontal nude’s head and hand. If one connects the corners of the frame and painting in *Torso*, a line is formed from mid-way down Sher-Gil’s head (her eyes) to the breasts of the frontal nude. This line acts as a kind of surrogate gaze, physically connecting Sher-Gil’s eyes with the breasts of the nude woman. Whereas normally one might only look at the direction that someone’s head or eyes point to discern where they are looking, Sher-Gil is able to indicate where she looks much more concretely without even showing her face. This emphasizes themes of revealing while concealing that have are discussed above.

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87 The line is created if one connects the outside corner of the frame, the inside corner of the frame, the outside corner of the painting, and finally the frontal nude’s breasts.
The only other definable element in the space of *Torso* is the dark blue blanket on which Sher-Gil sits, which might mirror the dark blue surface on which the frontal nude is situated. The shadows of this blue cloth are almost indistinguishable from the dark wall that completely fills the right side of the painting. The total lack of activity in the right side of the painting pushes attention to the left side of the painting. Even the right arm pushes attention to the left side as it leads the viewer’s attention to the space in front of her body. This unevenness of activity between the sides is emphasized by the amount of light present on both sides. Even though the light source seems to be coming from the right (based on the shadows on Sher-Gil’s back), the background on the right is extremely dark and the background on the left is much brighter. Note the shift in the wall color between the two sides, which is especially notable at the top of Sher-Gil’s head. Indeed it seems as though her gaze is emphasized with a physically manifest burst of light or energy.

Just as in Sher-Gil’s *Torso*, the architecture of the space in *Carmelina* only makes sense if read cursorily. The right section of the wall sporting the mantle seems to extend further forward than the left section of wall, indicated by the dark patch of wall in the middle that might be read as a shadow. However this shadow is not completely convincing upon close inspection—it is monotone, which denies the corner where the walls would meet.\(^88\) Perhaps the wall has been divided by this “shadow” not to indicate shifting space, but to emphasize Carmelina’s form. The right line of the shadow meets the very center of Carmelina’s head, extending down into the crease of her forehead and the, perhaps overdetermined, crease in her abdomen. While the right side of the shadow

\(^{88}\) Perhaps this line has been suppressed to clarify the purpose of the shadow, in highlighting Carmelina and the absence of the viewer.
emphasizes Carmelina, the left side emphasizes the absence of the viewer, as discussed above. Sher-Gil similarly shapes the viewer’s reading of Torso by manipulating the depicted space. The darkness and lack of activity on the right side of the work draws attention only to her right hand. The light rectangle of wall on her left side illuminates her gaze and emphasizes the frame of the frontal nude. While the wall in Torso does not necessarily make sense spatially, it does have a very important function in the work. In Carmelina there does not seem to be very much space between Carmelina’s table and the ledge on which the mirror sits; however, in between these two elements Matisse has fit an entire table. This collapsing of space maintains the focal points of the painting; less important than spatial clarity is the centrality of Carmelina (the model), Matisse (the artist), and the framed elements. Sher-Gil similarly emphasizes narrative elements over spatial clarity. While space is suggested, it is not actualized further than what her own body can suggest (for example, one understands her left arm to be behind her body, her right arm to extend in front of it, and the painting to exist in front of her body, but no other information about the space can be ascertained). In fact the spaces are extremely important to the narratives as previously discussed—the charged space in front of Sher-Gil becomes the most important space in Torso, and the viewer becomes hyper-aware of the space between Carmelina and Matisse and where he should stand—however, these spaces are defined mainly by the narrative elements (Sher-Gil’s gaze, Matisse’s reflection), not by architectural elements.

Like Sher-Gil’s Torso, Carmelina may have been Matisse’s way of showing the viewer a glimpse of his life as an artist. Carmelina includes a model, a large number of framed objects and Matisse as artist surveying and recreating the scene. Whereas Matisse
invites the viewer into the work to share in his socially acceptable gaze directed at a female nude body, Sher-Gil pushes the viewer out of the work, uses him as an aid to gaze at her own nude body, or uses the excuse of art (his viewership) to create a space in which she, as a woman, can candidly look at a female nude body. Though Sher-Gil presents a nude model in her studio, she is that nude model, making the painting much more about her psychology, her thought process, and how she has decided to present herself. Since *Carmelina* is depicting in Matisse’s studio space, the sitter’s psychology is somewhat beside the point, as the work becomes more about Matisse as an artist than her as a woman. She is a model, and therefore the viewer is meant to understand her as a mode by which the artist engages with his craft. Indeed, while *Carmelina* is fully physically exposed (the viewer sees her from the front and the back with the help of the mirror), Sher-Gil withholds much of her form from view, creating a bubble of charged “interior” space in front of her that is inaccessible to the viewer. While *Carmelina*’s only action is shallow and obvious—posing for this painting, Sher-Gil makes it difficult to discern what exactly she is doing, as she poses, paints, looks, and might be engaging in other activities.

Framed objects dominate the background of *Carmelina*. On the left section of the wall the mirror is accompanied by two mounted drawings. On the right section of the wall, potentially seven framed items are either sitting on the mantle or the ledge or are mounted on the wall. Matisse might only have put one or two paintings in the background to indicate that this was his studio; however, he floods the background with these objects instead, as though he does not want the viewer to miss the point—*Carmelina* is not just an exercise in painting, it is a painting about painting. The mirror, importantly, might also
be read as a painting due to its similar format and image-status (a theme further explored in *La Coiffure*), which would collapse and emphasize the themes of *Carmelina*. It would only contain the back of Carmelina (the less important figure) and Matisse painting her—a painting about painting that could not be mistaken for something else. Also note that a few of these framed objects extend past the edge of the painting. Frame edges coinciding with and emphasizing the very frame edge of *Carmelina* may emphasize that *Carmelina* too is nothing but a self-contained fiction to be placed on the wall in his studio. Sher-Gil additionally plays with the theme of framed objects, and paintings in the space of *Torso*. Indeed *Torso* becomes a painting about painting because of the presence of the frontal nude, and its relationship with Sher-Gil. The frame also becomes important in implying her own gaze, perhaps making a statement about art and its ability to direct and focus the gaze.

Sher-Gil’s *Sitting Nude (2)* (fig. 35) exemplifies Sher-Gil’s continued engagement with Matisse’s work throughout 1932. *Sitting Nude (2)* displays a nude woman seated on a stool facing away from the viewer. She is turned so that the viewer mainly gets a view of her back and her arms with her right leg obstructing the rest of her body and the rest of the space. One can see her right breast almost in profile, but it is not necessarily dealt with in a satisfying way—it tantalizes, suggesting a greater whole of the woman’s body, which is mainly hidden from view. The form of the breast is repeated with the sharp protruding element of her nose in profile. However, this is a not a profile view of her face. In fact it is what might be called a ¼ view. So her depicted face presents conflicting signals. The modeling of her body and this strange combination of facial signifiers seem to imply that she is twisting away from the viewer. Attention is focused on the space in
front of her by the color variation of the background. Note the darker patch of color
begins in the top left corner of the painting and concentrates in front of the model’s face;
it congregates in and suffuses the space in front of her. Over-modeling to create a hyper-
reality is again used to suggest the three-dimensionality of the form in space. Indeed, her
entire back is lit with a glow from an indefinable source. Additionally, the lines that
define her form tremble intensely, reemphasizing this hyper-real quality. One might
note additionally that the figure’s closed left hand is placed right next to her buttocks.
The line delineating her thumb from the rest of her fingers is very similar to the line
delineating her buttocks, and her hand and her buttocks are in close proximity. The
similarity of the forms and lines of these two body parts suggests the play of bodily forms
that Sher-Gil enacted in Torso. While the forms remain grounded in three-dimensionality,
it is almost as though Sher-Gil is saying that one line might as well be substituted for the
other, that the so-sought-after moments of nudity (e.g. this dark line, nipples, etc.) are
only meaningful in the context of the rest body (e.g. arms, legs, etc.). This over-exposure
(the inclusion of multiple black lines) deflates some of the mystique and “inherent”
sexuality of those parts of the body that are usually covered, potentially calling attention
to the ludicrousness of a naked human body being inherently sexual. Sher-Gil’s left hand
in Torso may serve as a displaced metaphor for her own nude legs, emphasizing the
tension between the opposing, sometimes complementary, forces of revealing and
concealing. The rendering of Sher-Gil’s left hand is very similar to the rendering of the
legs of the frontal nude. The comparative length and diameter of these forms is almost
identical. Additionally, the angle and length of the crease of Sher-Gil’s hand that extends

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89 Note the line defining her left arm from her back and how it shivers between the two forms. This was a
technique Sher-Gil also employed in Torso, but not with as much intensity.
past her bracelet is almost identical to the line that separates the thighs of the frontal nude. One may also note that the shape and pose of the frontal nude’s right arm is repeated verbatim in Sher-Gil’s left arm; this reinforces the fact that the location of the frontal nude’s legs in relation to her right arm equate with the location of Sher-Gil’s hand in relation to her left arm. The legs of the frontal nude begin where her wrist ends, and as do Sher-Gil’s fingers, which extend past the outline of her buttocks. One may note that the color value of Sher-Gil’s hand highlights her pinky and thumb while negating the rest of her hand, which almost disappears into the folds of the blue fabric on which she sits.

Finally, the crease, the bracelet link, the shape of the shadow on her hand and the angle of her fingers all seem to mirror the crease of her spine, its termination, and the shadows and lighted passageways that indicate the top of her buttocks. Therefore, Sher-Gil’s hand serves as a dissatisfying metaphor for the sexualized legs of the frontal nude and her own buttocks. Sher-Gil shows the viewer her legs in this displaced way, avoiding the display of her real legs. It is interesting to note that if this metaphor were played out, Sher-Gil’s bracelet would block the viewer’s gaze from seeing either her genitalia or her buttocks.

So, the viewer would not have access to her full nudity even in this metaphoric format. Once again suggesting, withholding, and concealing become central themes in this work contrasting the overexposure of shallowness in *La Coiffure* and the overexposure of exhibitionism in *Carmelina*.

The viewer might also consider the ledge in the background of *Sitting Nude (2)*. The line of the ledge meets directly with the erect nipple of the model, potentially suggesting a different direction for the meaning of this work. Whereas other female nude paintings might focus on the breasts of the woman as a particular point of emphasis, here
the importance of the breast has been equated to a seemingly inconsequential element. However, the ledge sports framed objects, as Matisse’s *Carmelina* did, and as *Torso* did. This suggests that Sher-Gil is interested in themes of inaccessibility, subverting preconceptions of the female nude, and framed elements as a signifier of the role of the artist.

Matisse’s thematic exploration of the act of painting in *Carmelina* is emphasized with the bottom of model’s right foot dissolving into blurred and indistinct patches of orange paint, reminding the viewer that this painting exists on a two-dimensional plane. Like Sher-Gil in *Torso*, *Carmelina*’s body has been intensely modeled to a hyper-real level (note the exaggerated reflected light on the underside of her left arm), reiterating her three-dimensionality. Yet as the eye travels down her leg, the form becomes less specific, color becomes less modulated, and the paint becomes a suggestion of reality rather than a representation of it. *Carmelina*’s reflection in the mirror serves to flatten her form further; indeed the inclusion of a mirror in the work suggests a play between two and three-dimensionality, thematically aligning with *Torso* with its instance of overlapping. The viewer accepts *Carmelina* as three-dimensional when juxtaposed (and overlapped) with her two dimensional reflection, yet both images are, in reality, two-dimensional. The transient quality of a mirror image also adds to the play of the limited quality of painting. A mirror translates a three-dimensional form to a two-dimensional plane in a markedly transient way, yet here the mirror image is frozen in time. Sher-Gil perhaps compounds this effect by changing her studio mirror into a painting (and one that is, I have argued, in some sense an image of herself).

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Sher-Gil’s *Torso* suggests, modernist inquiries did not effectively evolve, much less revolutionize, the female nude. Sher-Gil complicates the depersonalized and shallow nudes presented in *La Coiffure* and *Carmelina*. She inserts her own psychology and agency into the narrative of her work. Though she depicts an artist’s studio space in *Torso*, Sher-Gil’s psychology was not negated as Carmelina’s is, but heightened, and she is able to create charged content within the painting that proves inaccessible to the viewer, even though this is an image of her exposed, nude body. She creates a space for female sexuality, and potentially lesbian sexuality—themes that she frequently explored with works like *Young Girls* and *Woman on Charpoy*. She takes over every role of the artistic process (producing, modeling, viewing, etc.), shaping each role according to her vision. Unlike Matisse, who invites the viewer into his painting to engage with pleasant fantasies, Sher-Gil challenges the viewer, and makes it difficult for him to merely objectify her work. She reinforces her agency in multiple ways, including the inclusion and emphasis of the framed object, a suggestion of the studio and her life as an artist; she plays out this theme she in *Sitting Nude (2)*. This clear reference, among others, to Matisse’s work suggests once again that the dialogue Sher-Gil evokes is a complicated one. She does not demonize or idolize European modernists, but engages with their work in a critical, textured and multifarious way.
Figure 30. *La Coiffure*, Henri Matisse, 1901
Figure 31. *Torso*, Amrita Sher-Gil, 1932
Figure 32. *Nude Self-Portrait with Palette*, Amrita Sher-Gil, 1932
Figure 33. The Red Studio, Henri Matisse, 1911
Figure 34. Carmelina, Henri Matisse, 1903
Figure 35. *Sitting Nude (2)*, Amrita Sher-Gil, 1932
Conclusion

The argument of this thesis has been presented in such a way as to go from a more content-based discussion to a more concept-based discussion. One will note that in chapter 1, every physical element that was presented in *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* was discussed as a potential reference to European modernists (the screen, Sher-Gil’s transformed physical body, the sheet that covers her, etc.). By the end of chapter 4, the ideas and feelings that Sher-Gil evokes are the main features of the comparison between Sher-Gil’s *Torso* and modernist works; the discussion proves strongest when considering the larger concepts expressed by both Sher-Gil and the Fathers of Modernism (conveying the life of the artist to the viewer, the play between two-dimensional and three-dimensional space, etc.). This is not to say that *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* does not engage in the theoretical rhetoric of modernists or that *Torso* did not suggest formal relations to European modern formal expression—they certainly do. However, it is to suggest the potential shift in thought I am trying to engender with this discussion. If the main concern in discussions of Indian modern art is the fear that these works are being merely derivative, showing that Sher-Gil was both interested in and engaged with the visual and theoretical aspects of modernism alleviates this anxiety. I believe I have additionally shown how this engagement was not simplistic or shallow, but deeply sophisticated; Sher-Gil worked to further and complicate the conversations of European modernists. After this discussion, it might be important to remember Mitter’s characterization of Sher-Gil as a primitivist artist. After dedicating almost a hundred pages of text to the nuances and subtlety that Sher-Gil masterfully employs, this assessment seems almost
laughable. Yet the unfortunate reality of the situation is that this is the pervasive understanding of Sher-Gil.

The structure of this thesis presents a kind of symmetry in that the first and final chapters begin with a discussion of *Olympia*. The centrality and importance of *Olympia* to the modernist movement cannot be overstated. Fried points out (as discussed in the introduction) that the introduction of *Olympia* meant the end of absorption as a potential technique for controlling theatricality in art, and signifies a central shift in how people understood art. The fact that Sher-Gil seems to evoke this work in multiple paintings would suggest her understanding of its importance and her desire to be an active agent in the movement. Her engagement with it is perhaps a perfect example of how she was more interested in the concepts it evoked as well as the discourse it engaged in—there really is no way to see her critiques as “stealing.” Sher-Gil’s *Torso* (1932) suggests that works since and including *Olympia* had not offered any helpful progress towards a less problematic female nude. She does this by revealing how shallow traditional nudes are and by presenting content that is engaging while using the rhetoric of female nudity. *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* (1934) suggests yet another intervention in this traditional and canonical discourse. This time Sher-Gil is more forward in naming the artists she is problematizing and engaging with. In *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* Sher-Gil additionally offers a painting that complicates at every moment it might be simplified. Sher-Gil does not pretend that these interventions will avoid the problems inherent in the nude (indeed changing the mirror/Palette into the shallow, insipid, frontal nude would suggest she consciously understood her painting was necessarily problematic); however she does
complicate this trope considerably, empowers it, and offers multiple solutions for how it might be employed in a more interesting way.

Nudity in Sher-Gil’s work does not solely indulge the pleasure of the male viewer. *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* presents Sher-Gil’s breasts to evoke a conversation with modernists, but also to suggest her inherent female qualities as a source of strength, not weakness. In *Young Girls*, nudity is not publicly displayed for male pleasure, but reserved for female pleasure that might not be accessible by the intruding viewer. In *Torso*, once more the pleasure is reserved for female enjoyment, and interest in the viewer’s comfort is not a main concern.

Additionally, female sexuality is not about pleasing an implicit or explicit male figure in Sher-Gil’s paintings. *Woman on Charpoy* considers the reality of sexual desire for women in rural India. *Young Girls* presents a scene of two women who are blocking the viewer out of their sexualized engagement. *Torso* potentially reveals the sexual desires of a woman as she looks at a female nude, once more pushing the viewer out of the narrative.

Multiple other themes have proven to be important when considering Sher-Gil’s work. Self-fashioning and cultural/racial fluidity or confusion prove very important to her work. It is tempting to say that the cultural milieu of the time (the importance of identity, the audibility of the Indian nation, etc.) compounded with Sher-Gil’s own complicated history and education contributed to the prevalence of these themes. These must certainly have been a factor. It also seems that much of the time Sher-Gil evokes these themes as a way to critique or align herself with European modernists. In *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* she transforms herself into a Tahitian and reappropriates Japanese culture through the use
of the print. As discussed in chapter 1, the appropriation of another race begins this penetrating conversation with Gauguin’s *Spirit of the Dead Watching*. The Japanese print evokes the modernist practice of placing Japanese prints behind oneself in portraits, and additionally pushes the conversation with modernists further. In *Torso*, Sher-Gil potentially transforms her self-portrait, *Palette*, into a painting of a Caucasian woman. As discussed in chapter 4, *Torso* suggests the shallow nature of the traditional portrayal of the female nude—including its lack of visual diversity (the majority of women depicted are white, and those that are not white are portrayed as primitive, child-like, etc.).

The play between interiority and exteriority (accessibility and inaccessibility) is essential for understanding these works as well. The exterior and uncomplicated understanding of *Young Girls* as a lunch is completely reversed by the interior and inaccessible conversation occurring between the two women. *Hill Men and Woman* presents only exterior narrative that proves utterly ambiguous, willing the viewer to question the interior psychology of these figures (an endeavor which will not necessarily lead to a satisfactory result). The play between the accessible and the inaccessible in *Haldi Grinder* is one of its most important aspects. The viewer is placed on the periphery of the narrative, deciding for himself whether he can (or will) experience the mystical or not. In *Torso* too, Sher-Gil presents a world where the most interesting content is unavailable to the viewer.

Sher-Gil often dictates the nature of the relationship between the viewer and her paintings. Control over the viewer’s physical and mental positioning is asserted as she sets up his expectations only to subvert them and implicates him by placing him in compromising situations. While *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* and *Torso* could potentially be
seen as consumable objects of desire, this reading becomes harder to maintain the more one observes them. Sher-Gil additionally appropriates all of the potential roles of power in *Torso*, even aligning herself with the viewer as one who enjoys female nudes. The viewer’s understanding of *Young Girls* as a lunch is subverted as he realizes the sexual content; further he becomes a voyeur unintentionally as the privacy of the interaction becomes clear. *Hill Men and Woman* creates a tempting puzzle for the viewer, but does not necessarily offer up a solution. *Torso* either pushes the viewer out of the composition or forces him to identify with a mirror aiding Sher-Gil in her agency and indulging Sher-Gil by reflecting her own form back to her.

Another important theme considered in these pages is Sher-Gil’s self-positioning in active roles, including that of the engaged artist. Indeed, self-portraits comprise almost a third of her artistic output. The evocation of modernist conversations in works like *Self-Portrait as Tahitian* work to do this, as does her subversion of the assumptions of these conversations. *Torso* seems to be the best example of this self-positioning however, as Sher-Gil appropriates and activates traditionally male and female roles.

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As the quote that prefaces this thesis suggests, Sher-Gil was deeply entrenched in the world of European modernism; this engagement was not skin deep, but an integral component of Sher-Gil’s identity as an artist. This quote also suggests the clearest inadequacy of this thesis—its scope. In this quote alone Sher-Gil mentions the Gauguin and Picasso, whom I did discuss, as well as Modigliani and Braque, whom I did not have time to consider. In a letter to her father in September of 1941, Sher-Gil again reveals the level of her engagement with the history of art. This letter consists of a “List of things to
be sent…[including] books of mine … All of the volumes on Gauguin… Van Gogh… Picasso… Cezanne… Manet… Brueghel… El Greco… Egyptian Sculpture… Derain… “

Even if one only considers the modern artists she mentions in this letter, my limited considerations become clear. Sher-Gil maintained a consistent dialogue with critic Karl Kandalavala, kept correspondences with fellow artists, discussed her work with her family, wrote articles for magazines and papers, spoke on the radio and was even considering writing a book on modernism before she died. The way that she discusses art in general suggests how nuanced her understanding of the movement was. Even those artists I do consider in terms of Sher-Gil offer many other works that would be fruitful to this discussion. Hopefully future scholarship will explore the multitude of conversations Sher-Gil’s work suggests.

Amrita Sher-Gil had a complicated relationship with modernism, one that has been previously denied, suppressed, or depreciated in order to maintain an outdated definition of the movement. In this thesis, I have illustrated how Sher-Gil engaged with the movement, using Self-Portrait as Tahitian as her manifesto to directly evoke European modernists. While her other works do not explicitly communicate this relationship, I believe I have convincingly laid out potential relationships between Sher-Gil and the Fathers of Modernism. It is my hope that I have shown how Sher-Gil not only actively engaged in these concepts and conversations but that she complicated and furthered them. Perhaps what can be gleaned from this discussion is that this was a subtle engagement, and one that offers interesting implications that are worth unpacking. The subtlety she employed should have allowed her work to avoid being labeled “derivative;” however because of Indian nationalist and “Picasso-Manque” issues, it has actually

90 Sunduram, Amrita Sher-Gil: A Self-Portrait in Letters and Writings, 747.
resulted in these influences being suppressed or ignored. Perhaps she thought it was obvious. She commented in a letter that her *Child Bride* (fig. 36) was a too blatant of a quotation of Gauguin in her mind; this illustrates to me that she overestimated the potential of her viewers to see art history as she saw it, and to understand her works as she presented them. I hope that I have muted the politics, the racism and the elitism so that Sher-Gil’s voice can be audible once more. I hope that as future scholars consider Sher-Gil, it will be her art and not her body that warrants the most consideration.
Figure 36. *Child Bride*, Amrita Sher-Gil, 1936
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